

ANTHROLATIONS

The Magazine of Anthropomorphic Dramatic Fiction

Issue #2 — July, 2000

U.S. \$6.00



In This Issue:

Many Years from Now - Part Two

by Tim Susman

Illustrations by Karena Kliestoth

A Crack in the Wall

by Kashra

Illustrations by Scott Fabianek

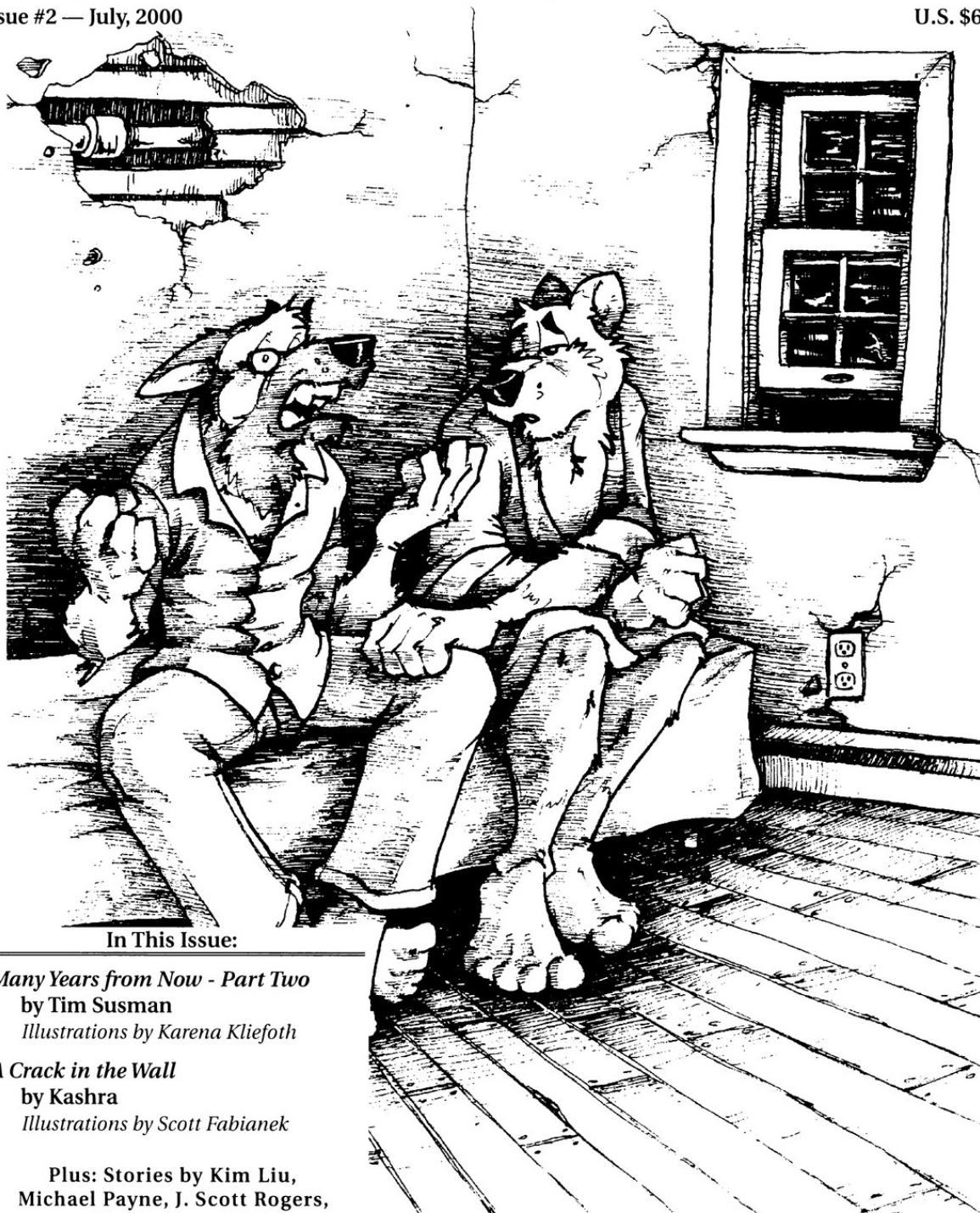
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Sofawolf Press

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Anthrolations is published approximately twice a year by Sofawolf Press. We welcome submissions of original first-run fiction which features anthropomorphic or zoomorphic characters and explores their interaction with the characters around them. The optimum story will be 3,000 to 5,000 words – but longer or shorter stories are happily considered, depending on available space. Anthrolations also welcomes artists interested in preparing illustrations for accepted stories.

For more information about our guidelines and submission rates, please refer to the Sofawolf Press web site.

Subscriptions

We regret that we are unable to handle subscriptions at this time. Anthrolations will be available for purchase at some conventions, or via mail order. See the Sofawolf Press web site for details.



Notes from the Editor's Desk

Time flies when you're having fun—or so they say. Lately I seem to have a lot of experience with both flying time and fun.

It certainly seems like much less than five months since I was writing the editor's notes for the last issue, and in no time at all, I had cartons of magazines sitting in my living room. I packed a bunch of them right back into boxes and mailed them off to San Mateo, flying out a week later to join them for Further Confusion 2000.

This was the official launch of Anthrolations — though due to bad timing, we had gotten rolling too late to get an actual table of our very own. Still, despite being a side-line product on Tim Susman and Derrick Dasenbrock's table, we managed to sell a few copies. I spent the majority of the Con roaming around talking to other publishers and writers, as well as meeting many of the authors and artists who had submitted to the issue. The magazine received a lot of praise from those that did manage to locate a copy, and I was pretty satisfied with that.

I spent the next couple of months looking for and polishing material for the new issue. I already had the second part of "Many Years from Now" ready to go, and Karena was ready to get to work on the art. An early version of "A Crack in the Wall" was posted to a writers' newsgroup, and I

knew I wanted to print it the moment I read it. Kim Liu sent "Crucible" a couple weeks later and the story count was up to three.

Then through a sequence of events, both by accident and by design, Anthrolations began to get some discussion on some of the mainstream SF&F writers' groups on the Internet. I was soon awash in submissions, from which I gleaned Michael Payne's "Mange" and Justin Stanchfield's "Joe Manx". Both are excellent examples of 'morphic' fiction, and their introduction here is just what I was hoping for. With the five stories I now had in hand, and J. Rogers' in revision, I had a full issue, and it was only March.

Two and a half months later, we're about to go to press. All the art arrived on time, and better than ever! The story folder for Issue #3 is filling rapidly, and reviews of our first issue have been enormously positive. I've planned some revisions to the layout and some other surprises for Issue #3, more details to be found on our website (www.sofawolf.org) as they firm up.

Again, I'd like to take a moment to thank everyone who has had such a positive impact on Anthrolations. My unending gratitude to Tim Susman — co-editor without peer; Jim Doolittle at Fuzzy Logic, M.C.A. Hogarth, and Elizabeth Barrette at Spicy Green Iguana — who all gave me such good press; Michael Payne for contract advice; and my friends for their support. I also can't forget to thank all the writers and artists — past, present, and future — who deal with such professionalism and make this job far easier than it could be. It has honestly been fun working on this despite the speed with which time has flown, or perhaps because of it.

Enjoy! See you in Issue #3!







Joe Manx

Justin Stanchfield

I hit the water with all four feet. The river slammed me like a bulldog. The punks who'd tossed me off the Coban overpass hadn't even bothered with a sack. Probably figured the fall would kill me. They were wrong.

I broke surface and swam hard for shore. The icy current swirled and pulled. Mud oozed under my paws as I crawled ashore, so cold I ached. Water dripped off my fur. I was too tired to shake dry. The autumn sun was a just washed-out glow between rows of dirty, rusted-out warehouses. I lay on the edge of the river, shaking like a kitten. If I'd had a tail, it would have been shaking too.

I had to move.

I wanted some answers, and I knew where to find them. Dumb luck had nothing to do with those two-legged bastards nabbing me. Staying in the shadows, I kept off the sidewalks until I reached the dumpster behind the 4-B's Cafe. The air stunk like burnt grease and diesel smoke. Nice and quiet, I jumped up on the dumpster and waited. I wasn't cold anymore. Just mad. And when I get mad, mice get nervous.

Something skittered below me. My whiskers twitched to the new smell. Eddy the Cracker nosed his little grey self from behind a milk crate. Maybe he smelled me, maybe he didn't. I didn't wait to find out. It was an easy pounce, the kind you dream about on hungry winter nights. I caught Eddy between my front paws and pinned him to the gravel.

"Going somewhere, Eddy?"

"Joe Manx! Don't scare me like that." He twisted around, his little eyes glittering in the dim light. He smelled scared. He had good reason. "Come on, let me up. This ain't funny."

"Oh, I'll let you up. Then I'm going to kill you." My jaws closed around his scrawny neck. I shook him just hard enough to let him know I meant business. He gave up fighting and hung in my mouth like I'd already chewed his head off. Down the alley I padded, alert for other cats. This wasn't my territory, but I knew my way around.

"Where are you taking me, Joe? Huh? Where we going?"

A screen door, the old-fashioned wood-and-wire kind, let me into the pink house on the corner. If the Two-Legs were home, they never heard us. I headed for the bathroom and jumped up on the rim of the bathtub. The porcelain was chipped and stained, ringed with dirt. Eddy hit the bottom with a thud. His claws click-clacked against the cold, hard facts.

"God, Joe Manx. Not the tub. Please, not the tub." His nose paled. I jumped down beside him and gave him a warm-up tap. He looked ready to cry. "Joe, this ain't funny no more. Let me out, huh?"

"I want some answers," I purred, nice and soft like I didn't have a care.
"Where's Mr. G?"

"How should I know?"

I swatted the little shit off the side of the tub. He rolled like a ball of yarn.
"Try again, Eddy. Where's Mr. G?"

"Joe, come on. Give me a break." He tried to climb the slick wall and fell back hard. "If I teli'd ya that, he'll have me chewed."

"I'll kill you right now if you don't. Give it up. Eddy. Where's G?"

He cringed, curling up with his snout tucked between his fronts. "Don't chew me, Joe Manx. Don't chew me."

"You going to take me where I want to go?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure." His beady little eyes were all glassy and scared. Little black pellets rolled out under his tail. "Anything you say. Just let me out of the tub."

★ ★ ★

Eddy hardly squirmed, just hung in my mouth, squeaking directions now and then. No one ever said he was stupid. Traffic was dying down, cars zipping past now and then, kicking up sand and gum-wrappers. I stopped in front of a brick store front and let Eddie drop, but kept my left paw on his tail. It wriggled and tickled my toes. The sign in the window said Compu-Pro. "This the place?"

He nodded.

"Come on." I gave him a gentle swat toward the storm drain. "You first."

"I hate cats," he mumbled, diving under the cement foundation. I followed him in. It was a tight squeeze, and the place stank like a wet dog. Cold iron pipes ran between cob-webbed joists. Lots of things moving; dark shapes crawling deeper into the shadows. I knew some of them: a Norwegian rat named Lars, and a pair of sewer boys who smelled local. They didn't so much as bare a tooth.

I caught a familiar whiff. Another cat was down here.

Eddie disappeared. I let him. Up ahead, jammed between the water mains, sat a cardboard box, the sides brown and water-stained. I eased past a rough cement footing, watching the path in front of me. I should have been looking to the side. A yellow blur caught me by surprise. All I saw were five sharp claws, trying to rip my face. I ducked left. Pain ripped through my right ear, and I heard my own skin tear.

An ugly striped face with just one eye slipped out from behind the footing. The fur on his neck was matted and clumped. He hissed, circling for the next jump. I hung back, waiting, wishing we were outside. The space was so confined I couldn't even arch my back.

"You got a lot of balls coming down here, Joe Manx."

"This isn't between us. Scratch."

"It is now." The fool dove in. I let him hit me, rolling under and kicking up with my back legs. He hit the floor above us. That was what I needed. My teeth found his foot, and found it good. He howled in rage.

"I'll kill you, you tailless freak!"

"Come on," I growled. "I'll take out your other eye this time."

A new scent drifted on the air—a fat, greasy scent. The sound of mouse feet against cardboard rattled the air. "Joe Manx," the rodent said, "What a surprise!"

"Call off your boy, Garfield." I saw the filthy cheese snapper out of the corner of my eye. "Call him off before I kill him."

The mouse smiled. "Scratch, don't you have a fence to sit on?"

"But, boss..." Scratch whined.

"Take a nap. I'll handle this," the mouse said. "Mr. Manx came down here to talk, not to eat me. Right Joe?"

Scratch took one last swipe, missing by miles, then slunk away. Eddy the Cracker crawled out from under a rusty can.

"He made me bring him here, Mr. G. I swear he did."

"Shut up. Eddy." Garfield said. "Now then, Joe. What's this about?"

He was a cool one, I'll give him that. Maybe he figured I wasn't crazy enough to chew him in his own place, and maybe he was right.

"I want some answers," I said. "I was supposed to watch that bridge for a milk truck. Instead, I find a couple of Two-Loggers with a cat fetish. You set me up."

"You always were the clever one, Joe."

"What's your game, Garfield? When I tell my people about this, you can bet the truce is over."

His smile broadened. "I wouldn't count on the South Side Association coming to your rescue, Joseph. Not after what you did with Sliggo's vix."

Suddenly, I felt real cold inside. "Don't know what you're talking about."

Eddy curled himself in a ball, laughing. "She had kittens, Joe. Get it? Kittens! Want to guess how many of them don't got tails?"

Garfield sighed. "You see Joe, the treaty is intact. You, on the other hand..." He flicked his tail around his wide ass. "You, I'm afraid, are just another stray now."

"Why should I believe you?"

He actually looked hurt. "Joseph, that's cold. You and I have been on opposite ends of the food-chain a long time, but I respect you too much to lie to your face."

"You just tried to have me killed." I flexed a claw.

"That was business." Garfield said. "A contract is a contract. But lying... Come on, let's go into my office. There are some things I want to talk to you about."

"I'd rather not."

"I insist." Garfield smiled again and waddled into the box.

I should have turned around right then, but he had my curiosity up. I followed him as far as I could. The inside of the box was stuffed full of Sunday funnies, all reds and blues shredded and wadded up. Light spilled in from a hole above our heads. A skinny grey fern-mouse was lying on her side, sucking on a flake of De-Con. Her eyes were glassy and vacant. Her smell was pure junkie. Garfield nosed her awake.

"Take a walk, Sheila."

She never said a word, just picked up her Con-flake and floated out a rip in the back. Garfield settled into the warm spot she'd vacated. "The world's changing, Joe, like it or not. Cheese?"

He pulled out a shiny, sweating chunk of Gorgonzola, so rank it made my nostrils close. "I'll pass. What do you want, Garfield?"

He took a long, gratifying sniff of the cheese. "A mouse's life is short and brutal. I intend to make the most of mine while it lasts. Do you know what's up there, through that hole?"

"Why don't you tell me."

"Computers. Rows and rows of them, the hottest, fastest, sexiest computers on the market, just waiting for us."

I could have coughed a hairball. "Mice and computers. Now I've heard everything."

"Don't laugh, Joe. It's more real than you can possibly imagine." He nibbled the greasy cheese. "I want it, Joe. I want it all. Internet access. On-line shopping. Twenty-four hour paradise for a mouse with connections."

I started backing out. "So long, Garfield. I got better things to do."

"Hear me out." He scratched his ear with a hind foot. "I need a package delivered from across town. I want you to bring it."

"Why me."

"Because you're the best, Joe Manx. You always were." His beady eyes gleamed. "I'll make it worth your while. What do *you* want out of life?"

"Same thing every cat wants."

He sighed. "Spare me the political rant. Why can't your species be more like dogs? Happy with a good bone and a soft place to sleep."

I didn't say anything.

"You can't close the Shelter. No one can," he said, "It isn't '96 anymore, Joe"

"It is for me. Why should I listen to you, anyhow?"

"We need each other, that's why." The mouse sighed. "You picked the wrong vix to howl with. Sliggo's not going to forget it. Ever." He put the cheese away. "You're a cat without a country. I'm a mouse who needs a fast cat. When it's done, I know a nice retirement home. Lots of laps to curl up on. Plenty of food."

"That's the best you can do? Put me out to pasture?"

He stared at me. For once, I think he was actually telling the truth. "Listen to me. I'm not the only one Sliggo talked to. There isn't a cat in the city wouldn't take you out for what he's put on your head. My way, at least you get to live."

I hate it when a mouse talks sense.



It sounded too easy. The bad ones always do. Skip across town, pick up the bundle, and get back. And if it meant crossing Coban Street territory, so what. I'd been there before. Easy.

"Don't forget the password," Garfield said.

"How could I? You made me repeat it enough."

I headed into the street and found a spot to wait out the night. It was going to be a long run, like it or not. When I finally stretched awake, dawn was breaking, a thousand rubies sparkling off asphalt shingles. I figured I had an hour before full daylight. Traveling by day wasn't the best choice, but I was anxious to get this job done.

The mouse had given me an address and a name. Natasha, my contact, a posh little Russian Blue doing the Two-Legger tango deep in Rich Man's Land. He'd shown me a picture ripped out of the Realtors' section. A long, boxy house with a walled-in yard and big bay windows. It wouldn't be hard to find. I set off across town.

Noon came and went. Shadows got long as I crossed the meadow where the Two Legs chase balls and call it a sport. So far, I'd been lucky. The cats I'd seen were insiders, stooges, not a single Coban Street boy. Only once did my neck-hairs rise. For just a heartbeat I caught the scent of hell. The Shelter. The Iron Door. I ran faster to put it behind me. Once you've seen the inside of that place, you never forget.

Up ahead lay more houses, big ones, all shiny and new. No missing the one I was after. A low granite wall snaked around it, the grass at the edge manicured and short. I jumped on top of the stone fence, sniffing the air for trouble. A willow tree arched across, most of the leaves already gone. A patio lay below the branches, sun-soaked and inviting. I picked up a whiff of cat. And something else.

Two Dobermans padded into view, long ugly faces swinging side to side, alert and watchful. These were top dogs. Real pros. I jumped into the tree and waited for them to pass. Last thing I needed was dog trouble. They swung out of view around the corner. The cat smell was stronger than ever. I branch-walked to the patio and jumped down.

The vix must have been watching from the moment I hit the fence. If she was afraid, she didn't let it show. She arched her long, sleek back, her tail twitching lazily. A leather collar hung against slate gray fur, the tag so bright it made her green eyes glitter. She moved closer.

"You Natasha?"

"Maybe." Her vowels were as long and sinewy as her legs. I'll bet she even purred in Russian. "Should I know you?"

"Garfield sent me." I said. "I'm here for his merchandise."

"What is a Garfield?" She brushed against me. My fur danced at the touch. I'd seen her type before. Bored house cats looking for a day off, always curious until things got too feral. She licked her left paw, stroking it down the side of her face, inviting me to disaster. She was like *kvass* with sugar on top. All sweetness and light until you got a good taste of what lay underneath.

I don't think I'd ever sniffed a vix so beautiful.

"Do you have a name, alley boy?"

"They call me Joe Manx."

"Well, Joe Manx. You are in a very bad place," She brushed against me, long and deep and slow. "This is no place for hungry strays."

"Look, vixie, just give me Garfield's package and I'm gone." She was making it hard to concentrate.

"A very bad place, indeed," she purred. "One little peep from me, and Hector and Ajax will be here so very, very fast." She meowed. "Like this."

My hackles rose. "What the hell's your game?"

"Why nothing, Mr. Joe Manx. I don't like rough boys from across the fence."

The dogs were coming. She meowed again. Every instinct said run. "Damn it! Didn't you hear me? I'm here for Garfield's stuff."

"Did this Garfield give you a password?"

The dogs were getting closer.

"Yeah, he gave me the word. Call off the dogs and I'll tell you."

"Tell me first."

The dobies rounded the corner, kicking up fallen leaves. "Are you nipped?"

"Tell me the password," she repeated.

"One fish, two fish..."

The dogs started barking.

"Finish it," she whispered.

"One fish, two fish, red fish blue fish!" I could already smell the Alpo on their breath. "Damn you! I said it, all right?"

"Good boy," Natasha darted towards a cat door in the side of the patio. "Follow me."

I dove through after her. The door slapped my ass just as the dobies slammed the wall. I was shaking mad. Without a thought, I swiped her rump, claws out.

"Don't you ever do that again," she hissed, spinning around, ears back, lips curled, the tips of her oh-so-sharp teeth showing.

"Don't push me." I counted to ten. "Can we get this over with?"

"Suit yourself." Her ice-cold style was back. "Come with me."

She led the way down a long staircase. Her feet whispered against the thick green carpet. I had to admit, she lived in style. I'd snuck inside a lot of houses, but never one like this. I paused beside a potted plant. It smelled like the first day of spring.

"If you even think of pissing in here," she said, brushing against me. "I will personally give you the Bob Barker treatment."

With that, she slipped inside the nearest door.

The room was bright, lamps filling in what the window-wells couldn't. It was cluttered, even untidy. Lived in. I smelled warm plastic and ozone. "Where's the package?"

"Up there." She nodded towards the wall. "On the stand behind the computer."

I couldn't figure it out. "A cage?"

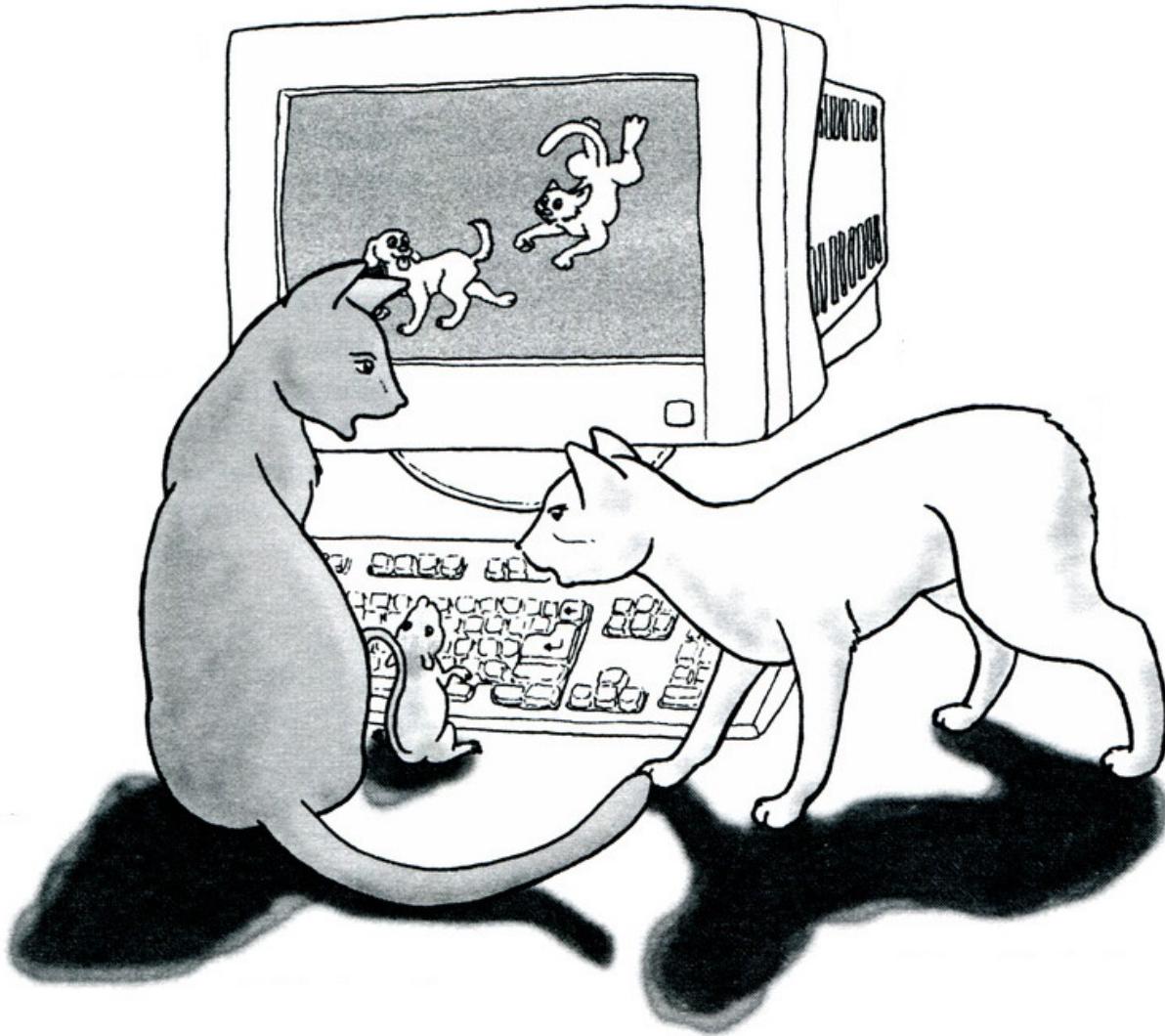
"Inside the cage," she said. "Is your attention span as short as your tail?"

I didn't have time for her games. The sunlight spilling in the window was fading fast. I jumped to the cage and looked inside: cedar chips and a big

wad of shredded cotton around an exercise wheel spinning close to red-line.
"A mouse? A fucking mouse?"

"It is a *fucking* gerbil," Natasha said, "And I don't appreciate your tone... or your language." She slipped a claw under the lid and pried upward. "Zippy, come here. I want someone to meet you."

A dun-colored rat jumped off the wheel and scurried out the open door. He was quick, grasshopper fast, darting back and forth, long whiskers probing the air. A wheelie. A hyped up run-junkie. I'd heard of them, but never seen one before. His glassy eyes fixed on me.



"A cat? A cat?" He ran in place. "Nata, why'd you bring me another cat?"
"Joe Manx," Natasha said, bowing her head. "Meet Zippy McSkury."
"A rat?" I couldn't believe it. "This is Garfield's merchandise? A rat?"

"A gerbil," " she repeated.

"Ooooh! Garfield." The gerbil actually stood still long enough to breathe. "Long time coming, this one is. Been waiting, yes I have, yes I have." Zippy's eyes fell on the computer. "Ooooh! The machine!" He leapt across to the table and started dancing over the keyboard, chirping with glee.

"Zippy, Mr. Manx is here to help you escape." Undiluted sarcasm filled Natasha's words.

"Escape? Yeah, yeah, sure, sure." Zippy hadn't even heard her. "Watch this." He bounced off a couple keys and a cartoon cat chased a cartoon dog across the screen. "Don't you love it? Huh, huh?"

"How the hell am I supposed to smuggle this across town?"

Natasha purred a little louder. "How would I know. You are the expert, da?" She flicked her tail. "But don't worry. I'll be right behind you."



Getting out of the house with the gerbil squirming in my mouth was no trick. Getting him across town in one piece would be. I slipped the dobies and jumped over the wall, my feet skimming the cold granite. Zippy the gerbil protested, squealing like a sick kitten.

He hadn't shut up since I'd met him.

Natasha landed beside me. I let Zippy down a moment to catch my breath. He ran around my feet, diving between my legs. "Don't your batteries ever wear out?" I asked.

"Huh?" He scratched his neck. "Batteries! I get it. Wicked, wicked."

"Don't worry, darling," Natasha whispered. "He does sleep now and then." She looked across the darkening golf course. "Shouldn't we be going?"

"We shouldn't be going anywhere." I said. "I work alone."

"Are you always so rude?" She moved towards Zippy. "I'll carry him, if you want?"

I smashed the rat with a paw and pulled him close. "What I want is for you to get the hell out of my fur."

"We don't always get what we want, do we." She padded into the shadows. "Come along, Mr. Manx. We don't have all night."

Zippy chirped as I picked him up. "Hey, hey, cat, hey? Easy on the neck."

"Zhut hup," I mumbled, trying to spot Natasha. I knew she wouldn't give up. Her breed lives for trouble. Night dropped over the city, street light pools spilling across abandoned lots. I hung to the back ways as much as I could, stopping frequently to listen and sniff.

Natasha stayed close, never far out of sight, shadowing me, hopefully watching my back. To be truthful, I was glad she'd followed. We'd entered the real No Cat's Land, weed-choked and reeking. In this part of town, nobody's ever completely alone.

"How much farther?" she asked.

I set Zippy under a wino bench. "A long ways. Scared already?"

"Hardly." She tried to sound bored. "But I will be happier when the package is delivered."

Zippy had found a discarded styrofoam cup, and was running inside it with glee. It rolled into the bench and stopped. I looked at Natasha. "What's the story on him? How did Garfield get his cheesy paws on a gerbil like that?"

Natasha shrugged. "Word gets around. Last week, a mouse from over the wall dropped a note inside the cage. I don't know the arrangements. I don't care. I only want to be sure he comes to no harm." She paused. "Zippy is... special."

"In that case," I said. "Turn around right now and take him home. The world out here is big, bad and hungry." The gerbil had managed to get the cup rolling in the opposite direction, bouncing over the loose gravel. "Can he really do it? Work the computers, I mean?"

She nodded. "Yes. He really can."

A cat howled in the distance. A male, looking for someone to fight or screw, probably both. Natasha shivered. Obviously, she'd heard about Coban Street love songs. A vix as pretty as her had no business on this side of town. Not when the wild was running in the air... I fished Zippy out of his cup. "Let's move."

I made a long detour around the Freeway Bar, hugging the cinder-block walls. The streets were dark and oily, littered with cigarette butts. Inside, the Two-Leggers were drinking and howling their own songs. The thump-thump of drums shook the walls.

"Why are you going this way?" Natasha asked. "The river is over there."

"You want to lead, be my guest." Her attitude was wearing thin on me.
"You want Zippy to make it into the Free Zone alive, I do the picking."

"Take it easy," she said. "I just wanted to know where we're going."

Truth was, I wasn't really sure. Lots of ways through this side of town, a hundred paths for a cat on his paws. But my feet kept edging west. Towards the warehouses. Towards the Shelter. Unwanted, an idea formed in the back of my mind, like a hairball itching to be coughed up. Half of staying alive is knowing when a door is about to open. The other half is having the balls to jump through when it does.

I'm sure Natasha figured it out early. She's clever. A lot smarter than I wanted to admit, but I was never going to have another chance like this. Not again. Humans say lightning doesn't strike twice. I say they're wrong.

"We're going to the Shelter, aren't we?" she asked.

I shrugged and kept walking. Zippy squirmed harder. "Shelter? Shelter? What's shelter?" the little rodent kept repeating.

Natasha laughed grimly. "It's no place you want to be. Me either." She jumped in front of me. "You South Sides are all the same. Stop the Shelter. Shut the Door. Stupid politics."

I set Zippy down. "Did I ask you to help?"

"No, and I wouldn't if you did. You think you speak for all of us, don't you? Well, you don't. This is your cause, not mine."

The stink of the place drifted on the air. It was close. Part of me wanted to agree with her. I'd already spent more lifetimes than a cat has fighting what couldn't be fought. If she'd pushed just a little harder I would have turned around and ran like a rabbit, but the memories came back. They always do. This wasn't about pride — not any more.

"Suit yourself." I picked Zippy up and jogged toward the looming structure. I wanted this over with. The wind was rising, cold enough to snow. Winter was coming. So was daylight. We slipped across the parking lot, quiet as owls. The Shelter rose from the barren earth like the gates of hell. If you've never been there, I can't describe it. If you have, I don't need to.

I kept to the north side, feeling my way over the brittle, dead grass. The break in the foundation was still there, a black gash in a coal black wall. I was almost sorry the Two Legs hadn't patched it. Zippy, for once, hung silent and still in my jaws. Natasha glared.

"How did you know about this?" she asked.

"I did time here, all right?"

"You? When?"

"I..." I couldn't speak. I shut my eyes, trying to drive the old images away. But no matter how hard I squeezed them, the picture of my mother being yanked out of that steel cage, while my litter-mates and I watched, wouldn't go away. Something like that no kitten should ever have to see. "Stay out here, if you want."

I ducked inside. After a moment, Natasha followed. She jumped in front of me again. "I asked you a question. How did you know about this? Who do you think you are? One of the 96'ers?"

"Something like that." I headed towards a heating vent. With Zippy chattering in my jaws I squeezed through, popping out in the utility room of the Bow County Humane Shelter. I took a long, deep breath. It seemed like a bad dream coming round again.



A few things had changed since the last time I'd been inside, but the place still reeked of piss and despair. The sooner we were out, the better. As I'd expected, the interior doors weren't latched.

"What do you expect to do here?" Natasha asked. "We can't open those cages."

"I know. So we do the next best thing." The room was dim, the scent of coffee and copy toner strong in the air. On top of a steel desk lay a computer, the monitor filled with little dancing stars. I set Zippy down beside the keyboard. "Can you make this thing work?"

The gerbil sniffed the keys, his eyes darting between the screen and the dingy computer it sat on. He pounced on the space bar. "486. Old, old. Good stuff though. Windows? Who still uses Windows?" He ran the length of the keyboard. "What do you want, cat? Huh? What do you want?"

"Numbers," I said. "Can you find them?"

"Sure, sure. Box is full of numbers." He was a blur, dancing key to key. The screen went black, then blue, filled with scrolling files. "What numbers you want, Joe Manx? These? These?"

"Stop. There!" I lifted my paw towards the screen. "Those are the ones."

"Oooh!" Zippy chirped. "Budget! Big numbers. What do you want me to do with it?"

"Spend it. Blow it. I don't care what on. Put 'em out of business for a while."

Natasha shook her head. "I am impressed."

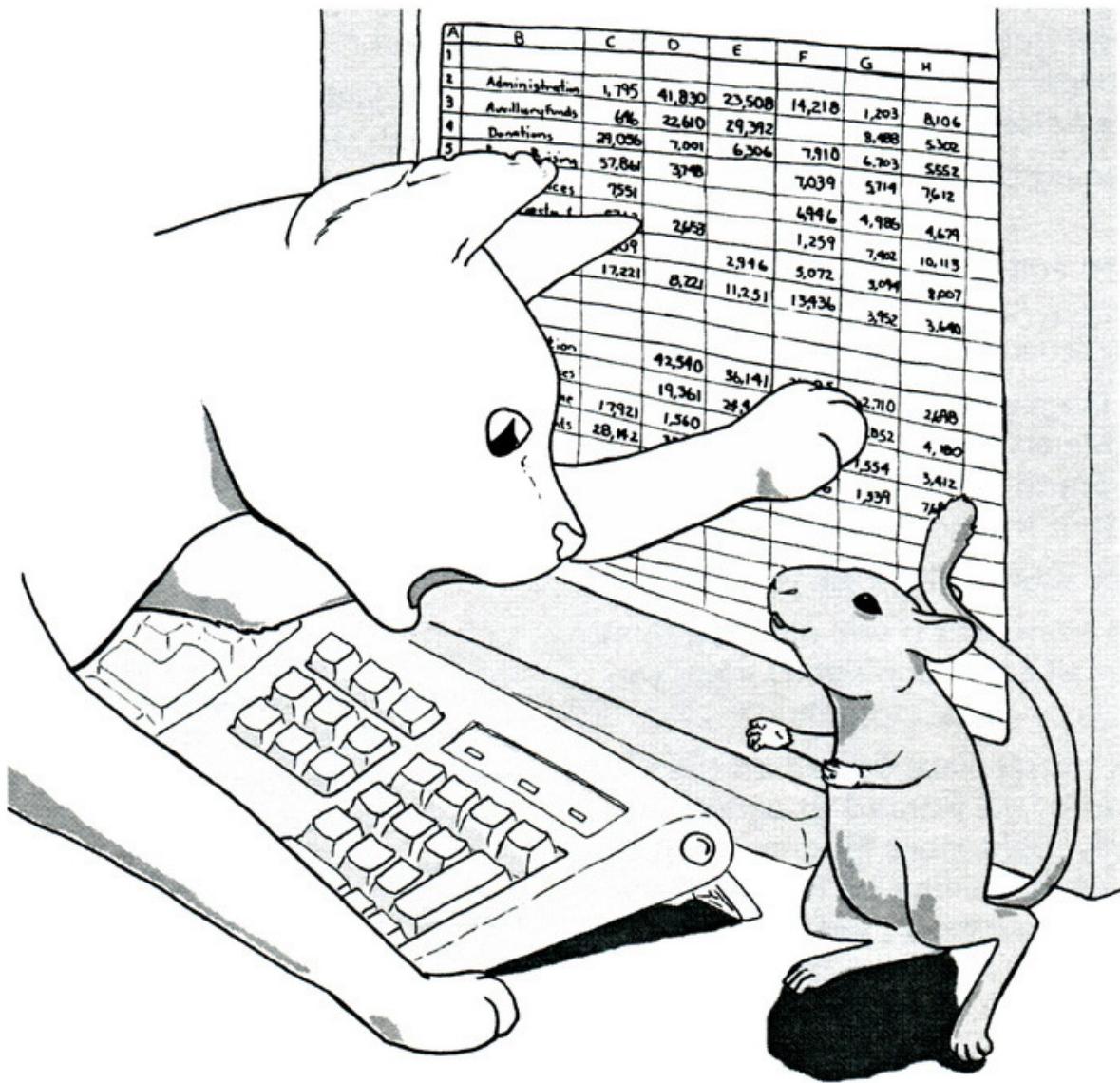
"We're not done yet." I left Zippy to his numbers and jumped off the desk, padding fast into the hall. Natasha caught up with me.

"Stop a minute, will you?" She was actually purring. That should have tipped me, but it didn't. She slipped around me, brushing against my side just in case I hadn't caught her whiff. "I want to apologize for some of the things I said earlier." She leaned closer. "Let me make it up to you."

I wanted to ignore her. I really did. "Let's get busy, okay?"

She rubbed against me again. "Do you know how this makes me feel? Hmm?" She sat down and started cleaning her face. "How do you feel, Joe Manx?"

"This isn't the time." I tried to move past her. She stuck out a paw and stopped me.



"We have to give poor Zippy time to work, don't we?" Her scent clawed my brain. Her tail swung back and forth with long, languid strokes. "After all, what do a few seconds matter out of a whole lifetime?" She stretched, her razor tipped claws raking the cool cement. The sound made me shiver. I couldn't have walked away if I'd wanted.

Call me a sap. But after all, what do a few seconds matter?



The Door. Dead Cat's Box. The hyper-baric execution chamber. We had a thousand names for what lay at the end of the hallway. The room hadn't

changed much in three years. A counter, a sink, a big steel trash can. The Two-leggers kept a lot of crap tucked inside, treating the place like a closet instead of a death chamber. I jumped up on the counter. A cheap radio was plugged into the wall, close enough to the sink to suit my needs.

"Help me, over here, would you?" I said.

Natasha jumped up beside me. I rubbed against the dirty plastic case. The radio tipped over. I started nosing it towards the deep steel sink. Natasha pushed alongside me.

"This is how you did it?"

I nodded. "In '96 we used a coffee maker. Took all five of us to move it." We left the radio teetering on the edge. "When the juice hit the water, we blew every circuit in the joint." The drain-stopper was one of the floppy plastic kinds. I jumped into the sink and pulled it over the hole, then leapt out and shoved hard against the long faucet handle. Icy water blasted out the spout, slowly filling the basin.

"Now what?" Natasha asked.

"Now you go see how Zippy is coming with the files. I don't want to blow the breakers until he's done." She sauntered off, leaving me alone with the sound of running water. It swirled in the sink, splashing and spraying, traces of rust and chlorine almost strong enough to mask the scent of death. I heard cats paws enter the room.

"Is Zippy done?"

"No, but you are."

My guts went cold. Instead of Natasha, Scratch sat in the open door, licking his lips. His single eye gleamed in the dull light. He jumped onto the counter, advancing in easy, gliding steps. He skirted the cold water beginning to spill over the sink to the floor below.

"How did you find me?"

"You read like a cheap book, Manx. I been following you for hours." He threw a probing paw, trying to sucker me in. "You always were a grand-stander. I want that gerbil."

Two and two started falling together. Scratch wasn't bright enough to pull this off on his own. He had help. I circled left. "What's Garfield going to say about you taking his merchandise?"

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about Garfield too much." He licked his lips slowly. "Funny, he wasn't nearly as tough as I'd expected."

He pounced, nailing me in the flank. His claws sunk deep, drawing fast blood then bounding away. Scratch wasn't as stupid as he looked. I batted at him, trying to hold the distance.

"Back off, Scratch." I bunched for attack. "You can have the gerbil when I'm done. Just step aside for me and the vix, and he's all yours."

"The vix?" The son of a bitch was laughing at me. "Hey Natasha? Why don't you come out where Joey Boy can see you better."

She slipped inside the room. "I'm sorry, darling. I really am."

They had me. Had me good. Natasha had played me for a fool; strung me out like a tom-cat on his first fence. Out of room and out of time, I waited for the next pounce.

Ceiling and floor rolled around me as I skidded across the slick countertop. Before I could get my feet under me. Scratch was on my back, claws raking my sides. I threw him off, spinning, desperate to get away. Scratch was big, and he was fast. And he damned sure meant business. I had to use my head and wait for him to make the first mistake.

"Here, kitty, kitty..." he hissed. He slowed his circling, trying to bait me in. His single eye followed my every twitch. I tried to keep on his blind side, swiping now and then at his ugly face.

"Go play dodge the truck. Scratch." I feinted left, hoping he might open up his belly. "I've got better things to do than screw with you all night."

"Always the bull-shitter, aren't you, Manx?" He threw himself on top of me. Red hot pain ripped my shoulder. I fell backwards into the sink. Cold water stole my breath. I scrambled out, dripping water and blood. He stood on the other side of the sink, laughing.

"Scratch!" Natasha screamed from the far end of the counter. "This wasn't part of the deal. You told me no one would get hurt!"

The one-eyed bastard grinned. "Guess what, vixie... I lied." He jumped over the sink, his feet skimming the surface. I met him in mid flight. Together we crashed to the floor. I hit shoulder first on the hard concrete, Scratch's weight driving the breath from my lungs. His jaws closed around my throat.

"Scratch! No!" Natasha's voice seemed a thousand miles away.

The world was slipping. His jaws tightened, making it impossible to breathe. Water from the sink flowed around me, chilling me to the bone.

With the last ounce of strength I had, I twisted under, my hind feet digging for his soft under-belly. He yowled and fell backwards, sputtering with rage.

"You're dead, Manx. Dead." He shook the water from his back, not bothering to step out of the shallow pool. "This time, we finish it."

"Natasha..." My lungs burned, demanding more air than my bleeding throat could provide. "Help me." I crouched, backing out of the icy water collecting on the floor and waited for the last attack.

"Good-by, you un-tailed son of a bitch!" Scratch's eye gleamed like yellow flame.

"Joe, get clear!" Natasha yelled. Something tumbled off the counter. The radio smashed open as it hit, pieces of plastic flying through the air.

The lights went out. I heard a single, surprised gasp, and a fast wisp of ozone drifting past as the radio met water. I felt the electricity bite through the floor, buzzing like hornets. Then it was over, the breakers blown. Scratch lay in the middle of the floor, his eye wide open, his lips drawn back in a death grin. Natasha craned gingerly over the counter.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"What do you think?" I croaked.

She jumped down beside me. "I'm sorry Joe, I really am." She started to lick the blood off my shredded ears. I pulled away.

"Leave me the hell alone."

"But Joe?"

My legs were shaking, my shoulder an agony. I tried not to limp as I staggered toward the door. Last thing I wanted was her sympathy.

"Joe, stop. Please?" She blocked the door. "I didn't know you when I set this up. Scratch lied. He used me, don't you understand?"

"Who's been using who? Just answer one question. Why?"

Our eyes were only inches apart. She swallowed hard, her whiskers twitching. "I wanted to save Zippy. He deserves better than a cage." She turned away. "Not that you will believe me, but he is the only real friend I've ever had."

For some reason, I did believe her. "So you give him up to Garfield. Some friend,"

"I didn't know." She was shivering. "I was a fool. I'm sorry."

I brushed past her into the darkened hall.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"To find Zippy and get the hell out of this place."

She sat on the cold cement, watching me. "What happens to me?"

"Right now, Natasha, I couldn't care less."



I found the little gerbil rolling an empty coffee can across the office floor. He hadn't even noticed the lights were out. I clamped him in my aching jaws and got the hell out of the shelter. Natasha followed us, hanging back, keeping silent. I was blood from head to stump, running on adrenaline and anger. Across the empty lots we moved, shadow to shadow, one street blending into another. Above the dirty rooftops a new day was starting to break.

"Joe, stop. Why won't you talk to me?"

I placed Zippy on the ground. His little claws clicked over the frost-tinged asphalt. "What's left to say, Natasha? You played me like a ball of string. You're good, vix. I'll give you that much. You are good."

Her head ducked down. For one brief moment I thought she might pounce. "What happens to Zippy?"

"I'm taking him someplace safe. You saved my life back there. I owe you that much." I sighed. "Go home, Natasha. You don't belong out here." I picked up Zippy and trotted west. A cold breeze was blowing in from the outskirts, the air pregnant with wild-smell. I could hear Natasha calling after us.

"Joe! Wait for me. Joe!" Her voice faded like the last lick of cream off a clean floor. "Don't leave me like this. For the love of night, Joe, turn around!"

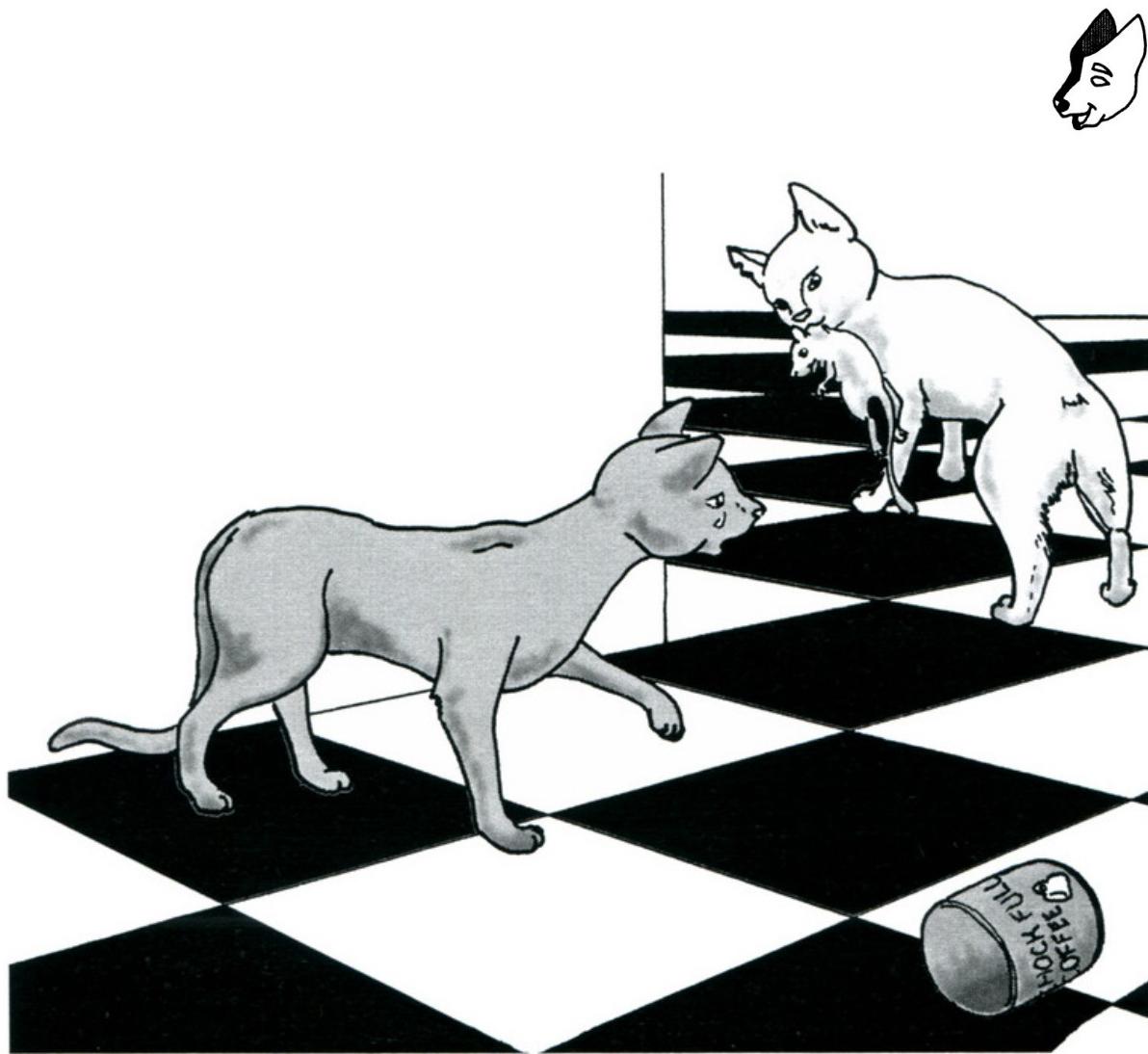
I stopped. I shut my eyes and stood there, Zippy hanging quietly in my jaws. Then I moved out, padding fast as I could away from town. Sometimes, not looking back is the hardest thing a cat can ever do.

I'd heard rumors of a horse barn way out in the country, past the interstate, a million miles from the stink of concrete and cars. A million miles from the Shelter. A long, tin-sided building with stalls and a clean wood floor. The kind of barn where the Two-Legs pamper their horses better than their kids. The kind of place that didn't mind a cat hanging around as long as he kept

the mice down and his mouth shut. The sort of joint that wouldn't even notice Zippy. Plenty of grain, an old computer in the office, and acres and acres of freedom. More than enough for a gerbil with a cyber-jones. And it was enough for me.

I never saw Natasha again. But word gets around, even out here in the boonies. I heard she went back to her posh home, settled in and had a batch of kittens. Funny how news like that travels. They say she was happy. I hope they're right.

They say a couple of the kittens look like me. I hope they're right about that, too.





Crucible

Kim Liu

"Lyseen—listen! You weren't supposed to be the one to go on the run to Saris IV—this last minute change has ruined everything," Itran had whispered in a rushed anxious voice in the dark base corridor. His ears had twitched at every little sound. "We need your help—your sister needs your help. Take this..."



"...and kill the pilot," Lyseen thought to herself, looking at the sleeping form in the pilot's chair. The ceramic knife stashed in her tiny sleeping niche kept jumping into her mind, with its clean, sharp edge. The blade was fifteen centimeters of non-metallic, light orange material, with a grip wrapped in non-slip red binding tape. It looked nothing like the knives used in the holovid shows she watched secretly as a cub — she wondered if his blood would look the same as on the shows.

With a shudder, she tried to turn her mind from that image, tried to quell the fluttering in her stomach. If at that moment the pilot woke up, he would see her with fur all a-bristle, tail lashing, and ears back. In that kind voice of his, he would ask her what was wrong — even be truly concerned — and then what could she answer?

The time display on the pilot console continued its flickering count, and other displays kept track of stellar alignments and hyper-space buoys. Lyseen still had three days before she would have to set a new course for the freighter, with the concealed cargo of weapons riding in back.

She would have to kill the pilot before then.



Four days ago, the task had seemed much more palatable. Lyseen had visited her sister in the make-shift medical area in the lower levels of the supply base, since real medical facilities were reserved for humans only, to see how she was doing. Her sister's brown fur laid smooth once more where once cuts and abrasions had marred it, but still lacked luster, as had her brown eyes.

Lyseen's more golden fur had contrasted with her sister's as she took her sister's hand in hers. "Lysanne, I'm here," she had whispered, and received no reaction from the limp form. "I... I'm going to have to go. I need to — I have to..." Lyseen had had to swallow and fight back her tears. "I'm going to try to stop it, Lysanne. I don't want this to happen any more."

"Please get better. I'm going to leave you a message for when you wake up — I'm not sure I will be back..."



"Or if I'll survive," Lyseen whispered as she turned and padded into the tiny galley on the freighter, failing to suppress a shudder along her spine. The stakes were higher than she had ever thought possible. Itran and his fellow concats — as people referred to the genetically engineered felines — had been conspiring for a long time, that she had known. The fact that they had been coordinating with other constructs on other planets, or that they had cracked the computer systems of the supply base so deeply, had been news to her.

Lyseen had been given only four hours notice that she was going to ship out as a 'companion' on this cargo run instead of Natton. Itran had tried to explain everything to her about what was really going on in less than forty minutes of that time. The 'accidental' switching of cargo modules on the ship at the supply base. The planned rebellion on the mining outpost on leeward that was waiting for the weapons in the cargo modules. The situation explained had been more than she could comprehend easily, a whirlwind of planning and conspiracy, a portent of blood.

The concat paused by her sleeping niche in the galley and looked at her sleeping mat, but only saw the hidden knife in her head. Beyond the hatch to the cockpit, she could see the pilot. Garland Dranson was his name. The records listed him as a senior pilot from the Core worlds. This far out on the

frontier, the Core worlds were half mythical — a source of orders which were given only lip service by the supply base staff and news which had little relevance to the concats as they struggled with conditions of hard labor and abuse.

Carland had been different from the local pilots and crews, different from the crew of the local asteroid mining ship that her sister had been on the last time. He had smelled clean, and his uniform had been impeccable when Lyseen had first seen him. The supply base staff had resented him on sight for some reason that Lyseen could not understand, and on his part he had concealed some contempt, or perhaps distaste, for the base staff in return, yet had never acted less than polite — even to the concats he had met.

Even to Lyseen.

Lyseen was no stranger to these cargo runs. Some pilots were gentler than others, though she had received her share of bruises and beatings before as well. As they were repeatedly reminded, the concats were servants. Lesser. The tallest concat she had ever seen had only stood one point six some meters tall when he straightened, instead of standing crouched over normally on the digitigrade legs the concats possessed. All were light of build, with provably smaller brain cases than humans, and the humans never let them forget it. The concats were made to serve them.

This human, though, even if he felt the same, was polite. His constant use of "Please" and "Thank you" kept her looking around to see who he was talking to before she would realize it was her. He had not laid a hand on her once in the past four days—hardly touched her in fact. Once he had even helped her clean up when she had dropped a tray.

"Are all the humans from the Core like this?" she wondered to herself as she curled up in her sleeping niche. Her tail flicked restlessly.

The hardness of the knife poked her through the thin sleeping mat.

"When he's sleeping, just take the knife, walk up to him, and cut his throat," Itran had said.

It had sounded simple enough. If it had been one of the crew from her sister's last trip, she would not have hesitated.

A little nagging thought asked her, "Would you?"



Lyseen closed her eyes, frowning, and fell into a troubled sleep.

The next morning by ship time, the pilot was still asleep, though he had moved to the bunk in his cabin. He had been spending the trip going over files and reports and writing new files and reports, and spending late hours doing such. Lyseen looked at the displays: two days and eight hours left. With a shudder, she turned away and went back to the galley. After cleaning and changing to a fresh uniform, the concat started breakfast. Carland was normally up early, but she doubted he would sleep any later than regulations permitted — unlike other humans, he seemed to take the regulations seriously.

Carland looked bemused when he woke to find breakfast ready for him. "Just like back home," he commented in a gruff voice that was surprisingly deep for his build. Fleet records said that he was one point seven four meters tall, though Lyseen thought him closer to one point seven seven. The records also said he had sea green eyes, a color which Lyseen had never before seen in an official record description. The brown hair matched the records, though. He looked surprised as he sipped at the coffee. "You made this?"

Lyseen nodded. "Yes sir," she murmured, eyes down. "Is something wrong, sir?"

"It tastes just like I make it — it normally takes people days to get the hang of it," he commented, tasting his drink again. "It's why I usually make it myself."

"I won't do it again, sir."

Carland looked at her oddly. "No, no! This is very good. Thank you."

"You're welcome, sir."

For the next few hours until lunch, Lyseen attended to routine maintenance and housekeeping tasks aboard the ship, such as laundry and cleaning. She acted more carefully about some of the ship maintenance — Carland had reprimanded her for replacing some of the air filters in the life support system. Technically, the regulations forbade any concat to be working on the life-support systems, but most of the humans she had shipped with had been too lazy or unwilling to get down on their hands and knees and clean out the dirt and gunk that gathered.

The human groaned and rubbed his head as she approached with lunch. Printouts lay scattered across the pilot console (which Lyseen noted to

herself was technically a regulation breach.) "The numbers don't add up," he muttered. "It doesn't make any sense. Where are they managing to boost production so far without matching costs?" The pilot shook his head, then looked up as Lyseen came up to him. "Ah, lunch. Thank you, Lyseen." He took the tray from her and settled it onto the matching slots on his chair, then checked the time. "At exactly the official proper time, again. You do an excellent job." The time and date was noted into the ship's log as he closed and sealed his working files.

"Thank you sir."

"In fact, for the past two days you've had dinner and lunch ready at the exact proper time, down to the second." Garland looked up from the ship's log and studied her in a way that made her nervous. "That's fairly remarkable."

"Sir?"

"Nothing."

Lyseen worried the rest of that afternoon. What had she done wrong? Standard ship regulations specified the proper times for meals, rest, and duties. The pilot was very serious about following regulations (except those regarding loose paper printouts) — she could not see what she had done improperly. Meals served at regulation times had to be what he wanted — left up to himself, that is when he prepared his own breakfasts and meals. Despite her concern, she prepared dinner on schedule.

Carland looked bemused again at her timing, but made no comment this time. "Thank you, Lyseen." He stretched and set aside another stack of reports. "Perhaps you can help me with this problem — goodness knows I can't solve it."

"You are welcome sir. I am just a concat, sir, I doubt I can solve something you cannot," Lyseen murmured.

"Hmph." Carland snorted as he turned to dinner. "Why don't I believe you?"

A look of sudden panic leaped onto the concat's face. "Sir? Have I said something wrong?" Lyseen shook as she kneeled beside the pilot's chair. "Correct me, please."

"Novas! Stand up, damnit — I was just joking!" He stared at her.

"Yes sir." Lyseen got back to her feet quickly, unable to hide a trembling in her tail.

"Something is wrong here," the pilot muttered, staring at her intently.

Lyseen started trembling. He knows! she thought to herself. What am I going to do?

"Stop that — I'm not going to hurt you..." He paused, looking at her eyes.
"You've heard that before, haven't you?"

"Yes sir," she whispered, looking down at the deck.

"Look at me," Carland ordered, and her brown eyes jerked up to meet his sea green ones. "Damn, but you're scared... how many times have you heard that phrase before, I wonder?"

"132, sir," Lyseen answered automatically, almost shaking now.

"What?" The human nearly choked. "You're kidding! No, you're too scared to kid — calm down! I'm not going... oh, damn it. Look, I want you to take thirty deep breaths, and calm down, you understand me?"

"Y-yes sir..." Lyseen shivered still but obeyed. She calmed down some but he could see that she was still frightened.

Garland ran a hand through his hair as if he would like to pull some of it out. "There's something seriously wrong at that supply base."

Lyseen nearly fainted. He *knows!* Her ears paled.

"Who told you that they wouldn't hurt you last?" Carland asked, turning the chair around to face her.

"I-I don't know, sir!"

The pilot narrowed his eyes and bit back irritated words. She could see him thinking, and it frightened her. This wasn't like any other human she had been with. The others had hurt her or abused her, but this one — he was dangerous to her. Lyseen couldn't explain why, but she was more terrified now than she had ever been before.

The human pulled out his ID card and slid it into the ship's console, then pressed the log command. "Log entry, as of this time stamp and date, I, Carlton Windsor, Senior Investigative Agent, Level Ten, Division Three, Fleet Internal Affairs, extend full protection of this agency to construct category seven, female, name Lyseen, assigned to this vessel, pending full investigation of practices on supply base gamma gamma nine five, under the powers granted to me. Computer: burn to permanent ship's log." Carlton turned and looked at her again. "Do you understand what that means?"

Lyseen's mind went blank. Fleet Internal Affairs? That was almost a myth out here. Senior Investigative Agent, Level 10? Her mind raced through unused memories. That made him senior to almost all staff on the supply base. Why was he pretending to be a pilot? He had to know about Itran and the plans! From a distance, she felt herself nod jerkily in response.

"Lyseen — I am ordering you to ignore any commands, orders, or threats that have been made to keep you from telling me what I want to know," Carlton said carefully, watching the concat — who was by far the most frightened thing he had ever seen living without having a stroke. "I want to know the exact identities of the people who told you they would not hurt you, and then did."

"Senior Engineer Almoran Del Targo, Fleet mining ship Goldrush, serial number 9801-22-38711-2. Shuttle pilot Julious J. Fontain, supply base gamma gamma nine five, serial number 7315-68-39712-3," she whispered, dredging up the memories and trying not to flinch as she re-lived each one. "Scanner tech Liana Johannson, Fleet prospector Long View, serial ,,

"Stop." Carlton stared at her again. "Perfect memory?" he muttered to himself. "Category sevens aren't... Lyseen — what's Fleet regulation... oh... 4.55.69 section 38 cover?"

"Regulation 4.55.69 section 38: During parade and ceremonial functions in inclement conditions, regulation 4.55.69 section 31 regarding required dress codes for all Fleet personnel may be waived for the following —"

"Stop," Carlton half-whispered at her, looking disturbed. "How long ago did you learn the full Fleet regulations, Lyseen, not just the minimal set?"

Lyseen's digitigrade legs looked ready to give way underneath her. The conversation was completely beyond her, and the look of terror she had before was returning ten-fold. "Eight years, one hundred thirty three days, sir," she said hoarsely, ears pressed tight to her skull.

Carlton leaned forward in the pilot's chair and peered hard into her eyes. "How old are you, Lyseen? Don't look away from me."

"Forty six years old, sir."

"That's not true. You don't have the marks of age in your eyes or skin or fur. Tell me the age you are not supposed to say."

Lyseen swallowed. "S-seventeen years, sir."

The human's breath hissed out of him. "What was your birth crèche?"

"Gene-Star facility 0221, on Tellion II, sir."

"Your real birth crèche."

"Sir?"

"Your birth crèche? What facility were you raised in?"

The concat looked confused again. "Supply base gamma gamma nine five, sir."

Carlton could feel the hair prickling on his neck. "What? That base doesn't have the cloning facilities to produce... no, it couldn't be!" He paled to ashen. "Were you... born, Lyseen?"

The concat nodded.

Carlton started to shake as much or more so than she had. "Constructs... constructs are not supposed to be fertile... making fertile constructs is a class A offense... under Alliance law." He swallowed. "Do you know Alliance law?"

She shook her head. "N-no sir."

"Small favors." The human tried to sit up straight again and stared at the reports printed out around him. "It... it makes sense now," he whispered. "The bio-mass requisition rates, the mine production increases without matching labor requisitions, but the life support needs haven't been changing..." He looked at her again. "What... what is the average life span of a concat out here?"

"Twenty six point three years, sir, for females, twenty point nine for males."

"And you're named Lyseen to replace the original Lyseen from crèche 0221," Carlton said softly. "Oh my God. They're working you to death in the mines to increase profits and breeding replacements to cut costs and hide it." Lyseen had not thought he could become much paler. "We'd heard reports of mistreatment, but this... novas! It must go straight nearly to the top... how could we have missed this for so long?" He stared out at the stars. "It can't just be one base... oh God." Carlton looked down at his tray. "I can't eat now. I need to think. The nearest Fleet base is... Hell! Who could I trust? I need to plot a course..." He tossed the reports sitting on the navigation console to the deck and started madly reviewing the nearest destinations. "We've got to get you, and the other concats out of this mess. You're not supposed to be treated like... like this!"

This time he did tear at his hair. "I was supposed to be out here to investigate mistreatment reports — we're still arguing about the whole idea

of a servant race, of making a race to be nothing but servants — but this... this is monstrous!" Carlton tried to smile reassuringly. "Don't worry, Lyseen... we'll protect you — all of you," he said, though his voice shook, and then turned to his course calculations.



Lyseen quietly picked up the dinner tray, somehow managing to not drop it, and returned to the galley. She very carefully disposed of the uneaten meal, cleaned and stowed the utensils, then collapsed into a shaking heap in her sleeping niche. Her mind spun madly. Carlton didn't have any idea about Itran's plans, or did he? Class A offense? Fertility? The concat clutched her tail to her chest and shivered.

Carlton wanted to change course. Lyseen couldn't let him do that. Carlton said he wanted to protect her, the concats... her sister. Lyseen believed him — after years of abuse she had learned to tell when a human was lying, on purpose or to themselves. She believed him. What about his superiors though? He seemed shaken and unsure.

The hard lump of the knife poked her still through the sleeping mat, reminding her. Lyseen clenched her eyes tight. The weapons sitting in the cargo modules. If Carlton took the ship to a Fleet base and they found those... Weapons smuggling was a serious offense under Fleet regulations... Fertility was a class A offense under Alliance law... her mind unerringly found the matching Fleet regulations concerning offenses. The only Fleet offense she remembered which mentioned class A offenses under Alliance law was... treason. The penalties were selective mind-wipe or death.

No one had developed a mind-wipe for concats.

Her sister.

A tiny whine or scream tried to come from Lyseen's throat, but she throttled it down to a whimper as she tried to think. Carlton wasn't just a pilot, he was from Fleet Internal Affairs — a pilot that was overdue at Saris IV was one thing, but what if someone was waiting for him? Saris IV might be alerted... what would Carlton do once he found the weapons? Itran and the other concats were waiting on them... to start a rebellion. Rebellion was treason. Treason was death.

Lyseen found herself standing, looking dully at the orange and red knife held in both hands. She had to kill Carlton, but she couldn't do it. Not now. Maybe she never would have been able to. She had failed.

Eyes closed, she raised the knife to her chest. "Good bye, Lysanne," she whispered and tensed her arms. barely hearing the galley door open.

"I'm going to change cour... Lyseen! *Stop!*"

The concat reflexively froze for a moment at the command, then let out a sob and jerked the knife towards her chest.

Hands grabbed at hers, stopping her attempt and trying to wrestle the knife away. "Let me go!" Lyseen moaned as she struggled with the larger human and was nearly jerked off her feet as he yanked at the knife.

Carlton swore as he fought to get the weapon from the concat — she had a death grip on the knife that surprised him with its strength. The despair in her voice was beyond anything he had heard from anyone, human or construct, and chilling with its certainty. "What... is... wrong?!" he demanded between clenched teeth. Category sevens were not supposed to be as strong as he found Lyseen, and that chilled him as well. His fingers tore at hers but her fur defied a strong enough grip to get the knife away. "Forgive me," he grated as he half swung, half threw her against the bulkhead.

"Everything!" Lyseen howled before her back slammed into the galley wall. The impact drove her breath from her, but barely loosened her grip at all — this was not the first time she had been so treated. The human swore at her and tried again, and made her whimper in pain. On the third time her head cracked against the metal, and she felt herself weaken. The concat knew she couldn't let him stop her or let him question her more, and her digitigrade legs kicked out at the wall at the next swing.

"Damnit!" Carlton felt himself falling backwards as Lyseen lurched off the wall at him. With her half on top of him and his hands clenched on hers he couldn't stop himself. The small of his back cracked into the galley counter, and then his head slammed into one of the overhanging cabinets. This isn't how it was supposed to work, he thought dazedly as he toppled forward onto the concat. An investigator is not supposed to lose to a cat seven...

Then the searing pain entered his stomach.

Lyseen whimpered as the pilot fell on top and one of her legs twisted in pain as the human's greater weight pinned her, but his grip on her hands loosened suddenly. "Let me go!" she pleaded before she jerked at the knife.

The human gasped and groaned at the jerk, and his eyes rolled back in his head.

Lyseen felt her hands become wet. "Oh no," she whispered.



Carlton did not want to wake up. The pain in his abdomen was most unpleasant, but the alarm bells in his head were growing more insistent until he could ignore them no longer and opened his eyes.

Kneeling beside the computer controlled medical facility was the most pitiful, ragged looking concat he had ever seen. Her gray uniform and her golden fur were splattered with blood, which he vaguely recognized as his. Where it was not matted with blood, her fur was ragged and standing out in all directions and her tail quivered like it was being electrocuted. Though her brown eyes, staring blankly at the wall above the medicomp bunk, were what moved — or perhaps frightened — him the most. There was more fear and despair in those two eyes than entire worlds could hold. "Lyseen," he rasped.

The concat stared dully at him. "Yes sir." Her voice was like that of the ship's computer, pleasant, feminine, and with no trace of personality.

The investigator in Carlton asserted itself even over the sympathy he felt for the sight in front of him. "Where did you get the knife?"

"It was given to me on supply base gamma gamma nine five, sir." Flat.

"But why..." Carlton's voice trailed off as he worked it out. The concat did not bring the knife on board to kill herself — that reason made no sense. The concat brought the knife on board to... kill him. The realization sent ice through his veins. He swallowed with a now dry mouth. "How bad is the wound?"

"The medical computer reports your intestines, liver, and right kidney are damaged, sir. It is doing what it can, but estimates that you will go into a coma or shock from toxins in your blood in a few hours."

"Then you will probably die within a day, sir, as the on board medical supplies run out."

Carlton had to suppress an urge to laugh madly at the thought of being killed out on this tiny freighter in the middle of nowhere by this concat, after surviving a decade of field work on the darker places of the Core worlds. "Well, isn't that just lovely!"

"Yes sir."

"Don't 'Yes sir' me!" he shouted hoarsely, then regretted it instantly as the concat withered in front of him. "Lyseen... look, there has to be something we can do."

The concat went back to staring at the wall. "Regulation 4.103.54 section 12: If the lives of the crew are in danger, the captain may authorize jettisoning of cargo, fuel, or non-essentials in order to make full use of emergency speed," she recited emptily. "The ship computer estimates a thirty hour return trip if full emergency speed is used after cargo jettison. The medical computer estimates you have a 45% chance of surviving. You must authorize this, sir."

Carlton felt a surge of hope, for a moment. "Oh, hell! If I go back to that base like this, and they realize I'm from Internal Affairs — they'll kill me." The thought came to him that the base personnel probably already had realized this, and had given the knife to the concat and ordered her to kill him — a concat murdering an Internal Affairs agent sent out to investigate concat abuse would certainly confuse the investigations. One arm twitched in response to his desire to pull at his hair, but the pain stopped him. "Wait a minute! The cargo has medical supplies in it — we can use those!"

A flicker of fear showed in the concat's eyes. "There are no medical supplies in the cargo that can be used, sir."

"Of course there are! Cargo module three contains six complete advanced medical computers with surgery equipment."

"There are no medical supplies in the cargo that can be used, sir."

"The hell there aren't! Then what's in cargo module three?"

"Five hundred mark IV infantry combat rifles scheduled for destruction on Highland II. One thousand two hundred mark IV energy packs scheduled to be recycled on Highland II. One hundred fifty advanced combat scopes for the mark III infantry combat rifle scheduled to be sold as surplus. Sir."

The human's lips moved but no sounds came out for several moments. "Cargo module eight has...?"

"Four hundred twenty five illegally manufactured civilian pistols scheduled for shipment to Rainstar Station for evidence in smuggling charges. Ten thousand rounds estimated ammunition for the same. Sir. The captured manufacturing equipment is in modules seven and six."

Carlton licked his lips. He wanted to jump up and grab this concat and call her a liar, because if someone was smuggling weapons, all the evidence pointed to... "You. You are. The knife. Why, Lyseen?"

A sob wrenched itself from the concat. "My sister," she moaned and clenched her eyes shut. "My sister... too many beatings. She won't talk now, won't move." Tears trickled down her face, fell to her blood stained fists. "I just want it all to stop. They killed mother in the mines. Riathe was run down for fun on Nerid III."

"They're going to shut down the mines on Iceward — just the humans are going to leave, and they're going to turn off the life-support systems. Itran wants to kill all the humans there. I just want it to stop." Lyseen sobbed freely now, slowly collapsing to the floor.

Carlton felt his heart freeze. The concats were planning a rebellion. The constructs that were genetically created to serve and be obedient, to be helpers were planning... war. They should not have been capable of even thinking about violence, much less carrying it out, but his wound proved otherwise. "Who is Itran, exactly, Lyseen?"

"Itran," Lyseen whimpered. "Serial number CC-5-0812331-12. My cousin. He gave me the knife and..."

"Stop!" The human tried to control his shaking. CC-5 meant category five. "He is your cousin, by blood?"

"Yes sir."

Category fives were cloned and trained for heavy labor, with strength over intelligence. Category sevens were for household help and cleaning, with intelligence over strength. Category fours were little more than bright guard dogs or beasts of burden. Category sixes, never produced, had been the designation for a guardian type. Category eight and nine were just hypothetical designs. Category fives and sevens were cross breeding — not that they were ever meant to breed at all.

"They've put you into the crucible," he whispered. Carlton saw it now. Someone in the past must have realized that breeding concats was cheaper than shipping them from the clone facilities at the birth crèches. By letting

them reproduce, they could afford to push them harder to the point of death in order to increase production. "They aren't keeping tabs on your identities, because such records might show when concats were killed and replaced." The concats were breeding on the frontier — having children — unsupervised, untracked. "You can't have had the schooling of a birth crèche to learn regulations, the category fives wouldn't have had the training on the mining equipment — who teaches you?"

"W-we teach each other, sir," Lyseen whispered back, still crying.

"Like oral histories... you've learned or developed your memory skills because you have to learn." Carlton closed his eyes. Concats with the strength of a category five, the intelligence of a seven, and with a memory only dreamed about for category nines. Concats who had been put in the furnace and had been tempering out on the frontier for decades.

And had finally had enough.

"Do you know what will happen when this gets out?" he asked hoarsely. "The frontier will explode!" His eyes snapped open and stared at the ceiling. "The Alliance government will demand the frontier concats be destroyed, probably pushed by people to hide their own involvement and from sheer fear. The frontier worlds will protest because if they are doing this, they must be heavily dependent on forced concat labor to compete with the Core worlds economically. The investigations into how this has managed to be hidden for so long will shake the Alliance government to its roots. The concats... you... will probably try to fight... If the Alliance bans all concats out of fear, the economic impact alone..." Carlton sounded amazed by his own conclusions. "Hellfire. This could shatter the entire Alliance!"

"Yes sir," Lyseen said dully. "I know. We'll all be killed." She dragged herself to her feet. "The medical computer recommends against your normal meal, sir, but it is lunch time. Would you like to eat, sir?"

"Eat?" The human stared at her, at the surreal question. This concat was the center of a storm that no one had seen coming, and the fact that she was still trying to serve him lunch was mind boggling. "Of course," he murmured to himself. The concats were genetically designed to serve, and many of them would probably have still been quite happy to, but they had been pushed too far. They were probably not blood-thirsty or wanting vengeance... they just wanted not to be abused or thrown away. In their

situation the thought of asking for help, and actually getting any, probably never crossed their minds.

Could he fault them for that? For any of this? "Lyseen... come here. Sit down. Please, tell me about these weapons... about everything."



The human's fingers stroked the fur on the back of Lyseen's arm loosely as she sat beside him. "Soft," he mumbled, eyes barely open. "Used to have a cat on Earth, with fur like this."

Carlton had been growing increasingly incoherent and unfocused in the past hour. The medical computer was warning against the exertion he was making talking to her. "Please sleep, sir," she murmured.

In her other hand she clutched his ID card. He had given her the two thousand letter long code to use it without him, commenting wryly that he had wished he had had her memory when he had had to learn it. With that code, she could use his access level, an Internal Affairs level 10 investigator, to override many Fleet and Alliance computers.

Lyseen could use it to activate the ship's self-destruct, and just end it all.

Lyseen could use it to override the cargo locks and jettison the cargo modules, and use emergency engine power. She would just have to add the course back to base gamma gamma nine five, and maybe she could save the human's life.

Lyseen could make the course change to leeward and deliver the weapons. Carlton would die. Course corrections did not require the override, but the plan Carlton had suggested to her...

The concat curled up into a tight ball beside the medical computer bunk and clutched her tail to herself along with the ID card. Carlton suggested to her that she use his ID card and override authority to seal the mining colony on leeward. By overriding the life support systems for the human living quarters, he said that she could force a surrender, maybe, without bloodshed and fighting.

"You can... take control of it," Carlton had wheezed, looking pale. "The war that's going to happen. With you bringing in the weapons, with my card, you can make... your people listen to you. Minimize the blood and fighting — try to lead them to a peace. If you start killing civilians,

everyone will turn their hands against you. You'll have to be strong, or we... humans won't believe you if you say you'll fight if they don't listen to your needs."

The human stopped moving and his breathing settled into a shallow pace. Lyseen pulled herself to her feet once more, looking down at the white face before turning away. Passing through the galley to the cockpit, she bent down to pick up the orange and red and blood stained knife. Even in her hand it seemed like such a distant thing, as was the ID card in her other hand. The pilot's chair seemed to loom around her as she pulled herself up into the seat.

The ship's clock kept the time indifferently as it counted down.

"What should I do, someone tell me!" she shrieked at the controls and burst into tears again. "I just wanted my sister to be better, to be safe! I didn't want to kill anyone!" The pommel of the knife slammed repeatedly into the armrest of the pilot's chair. "I don't want to kill anyone! I don't want war... I don't want to lead..." Lyseen felt the tears run down her face as she screamed at the night. Carlton had told her that if she followed his suggestion, she'd have to be ready to kill, human or con-cat, and be able to do it, to maintain control. Power. Authority. To make people listen when she asked for peace. To make such a peace happen.

The edges of the ID card and the handle of the knife dug into her palms as she clenched her hands. With effort, she forced herself to look at both of them. Lyseen thought about her sister, her cousin, about the situation on leeward, about Carlton, and about herself.

The concat thought about the future. "I want..." She shuddered in the pilot's chair, ignoring the pinch of her tail in a seat meant for humans only.

One final sob escaped Lyseen as she leaned forward to enter the course she had decided on. The computer beeped at her obediently as it accepted the course correction and began adjusting. Under her gaze, the stars drifted across the displays as the ship turned under her control.

Soon she would go back and listen to Carlton breathe his last, as her first victim.

Then she would prepare herself for the fires of war, for herself, for her sister... for everyone.

Lyseen would have to be strong.





Magnum Opus

J. Scott Rogers

"It's an experience like no other experience I can describe, the best thing that can happen to a scientist, realizing that something that's happened in his or her mind exactly corresponds to something that happens in nature."

— Leo Kadanoff

Victor leaned quietly back in his chair and folded his hands in his lap, watching the computer terminal proceed through its shutdown. He regarded the screen with tired eyes as it routinely closed files and logged him off the company's mainframe. It was the same shutdown procedure it had done countless times before, day after day, for more years than he could justly remember. He'd never paid much attention to it before, as it was hardly something that should warrant the interest or valuable time of a geneticist in his position.

The most insignificant events were attracting his notice today. The sound his laboratory's coffee machine made when it perked the morning's pot caused him to stand in place, watching it with an amused grin until the last drop fell into the decanter. Afterwards, he walked through one wing of his lab, pausing on the way to his office to watch one of the technicians scribbling in her laboratory notebook. Only when the unfortunate young woman started to fidget and glance nervously over her shoulder did he hasten back to his office. The various sounds of the laboratory, the hum of refrigerators, the whine of the centrifuges, all the sounds that had occupied his daily life for decades took on a refreshing melody, unique only to his ears.

Despite their insignificance, Dr. Livingston could easily justify these minor distractions today. It would be the last time he'd have the chance to witness these casual familiarities. They granted an enduring sense of identity to the place that had long ago come to be not just his home, but his entire life and his very existence.

Early in his career, Victor's science had forced him to make a difficult decision. *She* had made this decision necessary, but she also offered him a promise. If he would take her as his mate, his one true love, freely giving her all his motivation and passion, she would gift him with the success and renown in genetics and bioengineering that he deeply desired. He would rise to the pinnacle of his field and become a foundation in the research. He wouldn't be another lab-bench bound test tube jockey, rather, he'd rise to become a *creator* of life...

Victor had remained a faithful mate to his career, despite the sacrifices it cost him. He hardly acknowledged, much less cared how it affected the other realities in his life. The doctor's friends became expendable, filtering out of his life one by one with barely more than an indifferent shrug with each passing. Even his wife had surrendered to the complacency forced upon her, having washed down a handful of valium with a half a bottle of vodka.

The old doctor sighed and slid the keyboard back under the table. The office was silent amidst the stacks of moving boxes against the walls. The half empty shelves still showed dust free silhouettes where books, journals and other trappings of his office had rested — now just spectres haunting him with the inevitability of the day.

Most people would welcome the eve of their retirement, but to Dr. Livingston, retirement was a death. He had sacrificed everything substantial and meaningful in his life for the benefit of his career. Once that was taken away, there would be nothing left. He'd never considered this finality when he made his decision so long ago. Retirement would leave him a widower in an empty house.

The scientist leaned forward in his chair and removed his glasses, rubbing the bridge of his nose. He closed his eyes against the headache that threatened to blossom into another agonizing migraine. They had been more frequent over the last year. His physicians had recommended that he cut back on his workload, to ease back a bit from his responsibilities.

He ignored them, of course, as there was no evidence of illness. Why should he slow down? Despite the headaches, he felt fine most of the time and was still doing productive work. Migraines he could deal with, but *not* being able to do his research was unfathomable! They might've as well asked him to retire!

Apparently his physicians weren't alone in sharing that notion. Over the last few months, he had gotten more than his share of friendly inquiries from senior management about how he was feeling. There were *chance* meetings in hallways and in the cafeteria where the topic of being promoted to some sort of cushy management position was mentioned. They offered him a vice presidency with a nebulous job description that took him out of the lab and gave him regular hours. These offers were dangled in front of his face like carrots to a carriage horse.

He had resisted such promotions many times in the past. He was doing what he *wanted* to do, working on projects that he enjoyed. Anything higher up the corporate ladder would be a one way ticket out of the laboratory. He knew that upper management wasn't exactly thrilled with his progress on the Mythics project and was looking for a comfortable way to take him away from it.

It was insulting how simple it had been for the Board of Directors to vote approval for his forced retirement. He had been with Imagenomics since being recruited fresh out of graduate school and into their Biorg Research Project. He climbed quickly in the Research division, and with time, finally became its Director. It was all he could ask for. He didn't want anything more.

Of course, that wasn't entirely true, he did want something more... much more. He wanted it so badly that it became the sole motivation behind his drive as a scientist. That's why he started the Mythics Research Project in the first place. Victor opened his eyes and glanced down at the statuette that still remained on his desk, in the same spot it had occupied for years. A wan smile creased his wrinkled face. The small carving was a gift from a past associate that illuminated a hidden piece of the scientist's soul. It was a fascination that resided deep in Victor's heart all his life.

He reached out to the fine porcelain carving and traced his index finger over the sharp black beak, down its neck and over the mantled, blue-grey wings of the Kestrel gryphon. It was exquisitely painted in professional detail. An impressive and harmonious blend of a fast, agile raptor with powerful, leonine hindquarters, the creature was poised on a cliff's edge near its nest, its wings mantled in preparation for flight. It looked out from its vantage with its beak agape in an shrill cry and an expression that Victor always interpreted as being excited and eager. He was in love with this creature.

The purpose of the Mythics Project was simply to bring this magnificent creature from mythology into reality. Humanity had already created the Biorgs. The seed for their creation was derived from ordinary Terran fauna — their genomes engineered so developing embryonic cells would receive the proper molecular switches to develop in novel ways, creating sentient animal-human hybrids. What was stopping them from *creating* creatures of their own imaginations? The genetic baselines existed, the technology would improve with research, and it was a plausible endeavour!

Twenty years ago it had been easy to sell his proposal to the Research Advisory Committee and the Board of Directors, they snapped at it like a trout towards a fly. Victor's exuberance and dedication, backed by his formidable knowledge, track record and oration skills cleared most of the initial hurdles and green-lighted the project quickly. The funding for this project had been staggering... twenty years ago.

Victor's fingertip had gone to the gryphon's sickle-shaped wings. She was *so beautiful*. For a countless time, his imagination went to the skies, and the vision of his gryphon soaring through it. Her wings cut swiftly through the air as the lithe body folded and twisted acrobatically with its graceful aerial dance. She released an echoing, piercing cry that sang to his ears. Victor could see himself from a distance, earthbound, reaching into the sky towards his magnificent creation, beckoning her to come. She pirouetted mid-air towards her master, landing with a gentle rush of wings that fold quickly against her back. She padded directly towards his outstretched hand, resting her head against it. The gryphon closed her eyes and the corners of her beak curled into a pleased smile as he stroked her face...

"Dr. Livingston?" The voice intruded sharply on his thoughts, banishing the pleasant fantasies back to the limits of his consciousness. He looked up quickly and scowled at the doorway to his office and saw a whiskery snout protruding past the crack of the door. He realized quickly it was Jordan, his lab's senior technician. The rat blinked at the scientist's glare and recoiled slightly. "Are you busy?" he said softly, retreating into the lab.

Victor realized he was scowling and immediately softened it. Jordan was one of the few members of the lab that he could talk to. More accurately, the Biorg was one of the few members of his lab that had a genuine ability to listen. He was intuitive and intelligent, and Victor had warmed to him quickly over the years, casually taking the young scientist under his wing. Jordan was observant, and understood his supervisor well enough to know

when it was a good time to talk, and when it was more prudent to hold his tongue.

"No, no, Jordan, please, come on in." He noticed that his right arm was stretched high over his desk, still caressing the fantasy gryphon. He pulled his arm back and waved the Biorg in. His migraine was starting to pound, a searing spot of light in his right vision. "I was just getting my personal belongings into order before going home."

The rat glanced at the scientist's hand and hesitated a moment before entering the office, as if he were stepping onto holy ground. He quietly shut the door behind him and folded his hands in front of him, his tail hanging limply by his feet. He glanced down at the floor for a moment, his whiskers motionless before glancing back up to meet Victor's eyes.

"Why were you crying?" he asked gently.

Victor stared at the rat a moment, then brought his hand to his cheek. His fingers came back moist, catching the stream of tears that were falling into his beard. His face reddened and he found himself unable to keep the rat's gaze. "I... I don't know." he finally stammered and glanced back at the gryphon statuette. "Did anyone else hear me?"

The rat licked his lips and walked slowly towards the double chairs in front of Livingston's desk. He leaned against the edge of Victor's desk and looked down at the gryphon statuette. He smiled, his whiskers starting to quiver. "No, I don't think so. I only heard you because I was walking by to head out for dinner. Most everyone else is out for dinner as well. It's almost six o'clock." Jordan said. "Though, I was going to stop by and say goodbye, and see how you were doing."

Victor removed his glasses and wiped his face with the palm of his hand, removing the remaining tears. He looked up at Jordan with a smirk. "I just got a bit emotional, is all. It's not easy for me to just walk away from everything like this, and not under my terms. Not with so much left to do." He smiled sardonically and waved his arm. "Not with so much I *want to* do..."

The rat nodded and his smile broadened, feeling more comfortable. "I'm sure, doc. Can't say I blame you for feeling that way." He glanced at the gryphon again. "Too bad she never flew." He reached over and lightly tapped the statuette with a claw tip. "You put a lot of love into this project. It was an inspiration to see you so passionate about it. There's not many in

this profession that can still profess that much love for their work." He withdrew his hand and looked back at the human. "I'm sorry the boys upstairs didn't share that with you."

Victor inhaled, leaned back in his chair, and exhaled softly. "It was a financial decision on their part, Jordan, not a personal one. In retrospect, I guess it was the correct one as well. They gave me my shot, much *more* of one that I rightfully deserved." He swallowed and massaged his forehead with his fingertips, his migraine was getting worse. "The Mythic Project was nothing more than a billion dollar, twenty year failure waiting to happen." He dropped his arm back to his desk. "Even with our most sincere efforts, Nature just isn't always eager to give us her secrets, no matter how much we coax her into doing such. The Mythics were just doomed to remain one of those secrets."

The scientist looked back at Jordan. It was a conversation they had shared many times in the past. The expectant expression on the rat's face compelled him to leave his student — his friend — with something more. Jordan deserved at least a taste of the wisdom he had gained over the years.

"Love and passion aren't enough." Victor frowned and tapped his finger on his desk to emphasize his point. "Nature is always the Master, we are always the student. I forgot that, and over the last twenty years, she has painfully reminded me of this. We cannot wrest what we want from her, rather, we have to patiently pursue it through our discipline, and learn when to accept our failures with dignity and grace."

The scientist paused for a brief moment, looking past Jordan's face. "Even when it is thrown upon us by a significantly lesser force than Nature..."

Victor pushed away from his desk, took his cane and slowly stood with a wince. He was getting dizzy from the headache and needed some fresh air. A walk through the orange grove would be perfect right now. The blossoms were out and the air was sweet with their scent. His words had felt hollow, cold and meaningless. He didn't believe them, but it was the appropriate thing to say. He restrained himself from voicing his true feelings. Venting bitterness about the company and whining about his personal disappointment would've sounded selfish, if not completely childish. At least he could leave Jordan with a measure of dignity, rather than a lasting impression of a defeated old man with his dreams dashed to splinters on the rocks.

"I'm going to take a short walk before taking the rest of my belongings, Jordan. I'll be back in an hour," he said stiffly, then walked towards his office door with the briefest glance towards the statuette.

Jordan watched him quietly. "What's her name?" he asked suddenly.

The old scientist paused with his hand on the doorknob. He was stunned by the question. Jordan had seen right past the doctor's words and exposed their mendacity with the precision of a surgeon's knife. Victor looked back. "She doesn't have one," he said with a whisper. "I was going to name her the day I saw her *real* eyes looking back at me." He surprised himself by forcing back a light sob, catching a fresh tear from the corner of his eye with his thumb. This was hardly the swan song he intended.

"She was to be my magnum opus, Jordan, my life's greatest accomplishment. That's something which is impossible to name until you witness it come to fruition. It must pass beyond the boundaries of your dreams and imagination until it comes into being." He cleared the emotion back in his throat and straightened up, smiling with a forced change in attitude.

"I don't expect you to understand. It's difficult for one as young as you to seize the importance of what I'm saying. Let's just say, she was my greatest dream, and my greatest failure..."

Jordan nodded, feeling for the doctor's discomfiture. He walked over to the old man with a compassionate smile and stood in front of him. "I'm sorry, Victor," he said evenly. "I can't honestly say I fully understand, not as much as you do, but I can understand why you feel that way." He extended his hand to the scientist. "It has been an honor, and a pleasure working for you."

Victor took the Biorg's hand and returned the gesture. "Thank you, and I feel likewise to know your company, Jordan." He turned to leave.

Jordan followed Victor out of his office and towards the laboratory's door. The intense disappointment radiating from the old scientist made him want to say something to comfort his mentor.

"Doc, she's not a failure. You did bring her to life, in a way. Your passion for this project made her real in the imaginations of everyone that worked on it."

Victor walked down the hallway without responding.



The late afternoon was pleasantly warm and the walk through the aromatic orange grove uplifted Victor's spirits. The sun was starting to set low on the western horizon, casting shadows from the trees across the cement pathway. The orange grove had always been the scientist's favorite retreat. It was a peaceful place that allowed him to think, undisturbed by the lab, telephones or questions. Except for the infrequent jogger that trotted by, or a wayward crow that cawed noisily from the top of a tree, the scientist was usually alone.

He approached the old, wrought iron bench that rested in the center of the grove and slowly sat down, folding his hands on top of the cane. He took a deep breath, inhaling the refreshing scent of orange blossoms that came every spring from the old trees. The air was filled with the soft buzz of honeybees and the rustle of leaves in the gentle afternoon breeze.

He had taken afternoon walks here for many years, watching the trees grow and age with him. They, at least, seemed to retain a significant purpose in their life. They also appeared to weather the years better than he did, and they would certainly do so for many more after he was gone. A final afternoon of rest in the grove seemed an appropriate epitaph to his career. He closed his eyes and let the pleasant sensations bid him goodbye.

There was a sudden rustling of tree branches somewhere down the path. Victor frowned at the disturbance to his tranquility, but kept his eyes closed. Probably a jogger taking a short cut through the grove. He waited for the sound of running shoes and breathless panting to come up the pathway, pass right by, and leave him in peace.

Instead of the soft pad of sneakers, a clacking sound like cleats on the cement path approached the bench. Victor exhaled through his nose and set his jaw, his impatience rising. The clacking noise stopped directly in front of him. Victor could feel a presence waiting before him. Obviously someone felt the need to talk to him.

The scientist opened his eyes and immediately felt his stomach turn to ice, catching the breath in his throat. Every muscle in his body froze. The head of a gigantic hawk stared back at him with large, unblinking clear brown eyes. Its black beak was sharp and its end was hooked like a scythe. Its

wickedly curved, black talons rested on the edge of the path, a mere foot from his legs.

Victor was petrified. His legs wouldn't budge, and his hands just sat quivering on top of his cane. Everything else around him ceased to be, it was just him and this creature.

The monster stared at Victor, its head slightly cocked, as motionless as the old man for few moments before it suddenly lowered its head and shoulders, foreclaws stretching out in front. Its leonine rump remained standing, a fledged, spaded tail flicked out high behind it. The creature's wings spread, displaying an impressive wingspan of bluish wings with a mottled striping. Its beak separated into a ...*smile*?

"Father! It's finally you! It's about time you showed up, I was worried you'd never come!" the creature squawked merrily in a surprisingly pleasant voice. It held its pose, eerily resembling that of a ludicrously gigantic puppy wanting its master to play a game of catch.

Sharp, delta shaped tufts of feathers perked erect on top of the hawk's head as it looked at him. One of them craned independently of the other as the creature stared at him, awaiting a response. The scientist's paralyzation slowly faded as the realization of what he was looking at filtered through his mind. His jaw fell open as he stared down at the gryphon. "Oh... oh my God..." he stuttered in an awed whisper.

The gryphon cocked its head again and took on an expression of concern. It almost looked disappointed.

"Father? You don't know me?" it asked softly, then recognized the lingering terror in the man's face. Its ear tufts flattened on its skull. "I'm... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you." the gryphon said, sitting up immediately on its haunches and bowing its head towards the doctor in a submissive display. "I was so excited to finally see you that I lost control of myself. I am such a fledgling... please forgive me." The gryphon's sickle shaped wings folded tightly against its back.

Victor blinked, refusing to believe his eyes or his ears. It was impossible! Gryphons didn't exist! Yet, there was one, bowing before him like an admonished child, begging his forgiveness. His eyes quickly took in the rest of the creature's body. It was that of a female kestrel, just like... no, *identical* to the statuette on his desk.

Victor gasped, his hands gripping the top of his cane until his knuckles turned white. He stared at the gryphon, slowly shaking his head. "You're... you're my statuette. The one on my desk. Where did you come from?" A smile grew on his face. Despite his disbelief and fading terror, the hallucination was something he wanted to believe.

The gryphon raised her head and looked Victor in the face, her expression changed quickly from one of supplication to one of joy. "You made a statue of me? That's very sweet of you!" she said, apparently ignoring his question. She made a pleased, purring noise and inched forward on her talons, stretching her head towards the human, seemingly to beg his touch.

The old man slowly extended his hand and touched his fingertips to the gryphon's smooth beak. He pressed his hand to the creature's cheek and dug his fingertips into the feathers. They felt exactly as they had in his daydreams. The gryphon closed her eyes, relaxed her ear tufts and pressed the side of her head against his hand, the purring increasing in volume as the old man stroked her head.

Victor's vision quickly blurred with tears. With a soft moan, he dropped his cane and eagerly brought his other hand to the gryphon's head, feeling the magnificent creature. She made soft, clicking noises of pleasure as he massaged his fingers through her neck feathers. The sheer strength and raw power Victor felt as she playfully pressed against his hands willingly broke down his last reservations of disbelief.

The scientist started to cry, wracking his body with sobs of joy. For some inexplicable reason, the manifestation of his lifelong dream had come to a reality this afternoon in the orange groves. He was too old, and too tired to question the source any longer. He wished it to be true for so long, and now it was. If this gryphon was merely a migraine induced hallucination, or two decades of failure snapping the remaining objectivism from his mind, it mattered not in the least. He would accept this. He was due this one, simple joy. Right now, he was just an old man witnessing his greatest dream.

The gryphon leaned closer and put a talon around Victor's back, gently hugging him against the soft feathers of her chest. "I know you're filled with questions," she said softly, leaning back and raising the back of one of her claws to catch a tear on his cheek. "Now isn't the time, but everything will be known to you later, after we get home."

She swiftly backed up on the path and lowered herself to her belly, folding her wings tightly against her back. She smiled at Victor. There was a prideful look on her avian face, holding her beak high.

"I was sent to take you home, father. Climb on my back and I'll fly you there."

Victor wiped his tears with a hanky then smiled at the gryphon, staying seated on the bench. He wondered what 'home' was to this gryphon, but the opportunity to fly pushed those thoughts out of his head. Suddenly, visions of him clinging for dear life to the back of her as she soared through the sky brought an unexpected pang of fear to his heart. The scientist was much too old for such a physical effort. His arthritis and migraines would exclude him from the feat.

He cleared his throat from the residual emotion. "My dear, I'm sorry to say that I'm entirely much too old to be flying with you, I..."

Victor paused mid-sentence, realizing that his migraine was completely gone. The searing motes of light that blinded him during the headaches had vanished, and his vision was clear. Not a trace of the pain was left. He touched his forehead in astonishment. As he lifted his arm, he noticed that the dull stiffness in his joints was gone, too. His fingers were as flexible as they had been forty years ago.

The gryphon grinned at the old man as he stared wide eyed at his hands, "...you were saying?" she said teasingly, her tail flicking behind her patiently. "I think you should be feeling quite fine about now!" The gryphon winked at him knowingly.

Victor slowly stood, leaving his cane where it lay on the ground and took several steps towards the gryphon, her expression of happiness encouraging him on. He paused and examined his hands again while shaking his head.

"Father, please come with me," she implored. "I've come so far to finally meet you. I've been waiting a long time to have you on my back, to share the joy of flying with you. I've always wanted you to be proud of me, and now is our chance to know each other." She watched him expectantly, ear tufts perked.

He looked up into the gryphon's face and nodded once. He flanked the gryphon and lay his hands on her back, feeling her musculature as he slowly swung his leg over and mounted her. He gripped the large feathers on the back of her neck and found them a satisfying hold.

"Yes... there's much I want to know about you as well," Victor said with a grin of anticipation, a surge of elation warming his heart, "...my daughter." He felt like laughing out loud. For the first time in many years, he was genuinely happy. He didn't care where the gryphon was taking him, it didn't matter anymore. Victor somehow knew he was going *somewhere*, and that gave him the feeling he hadn't lost everything.

The gryphon looked over her shoulder and smiled back at her passenger, the ends of her beak curling with the gesture. She stood up and spread her wings, but paused.

"Father? What's my name?"

The old scientist had almost anticipated this question. It seemed somehow necessary before their journey commenced. She was his creation, either real or imagined, and only he could name her. He thought about his feelings. Joy. Elation. Pleasure... even the nagging scientific stoicism that kept disturbing him with reminders that this was all still impossible.

Victor suddenly laughed. He had thought that when this day happened, giving a name to his magnum opus would be easy. Yet, here he sat without a single idea how to even approach the question. How would he give her a name?

Victor leaned forward slightly on her back and stroked the feathers of her neck. "My dear, let me be satisfied calling you 'Daughter' for now. I'm... I'm just not good with names."

The gryphon blinked, clacked her beak and nodded her acceptance quickly before turning her head towards the sky and stroking her wings, lifting herself and her father high into the sky.



Jordan sat down on the old iron bench and opened the tiny cooler that held his lunch, setting it on the bench beside him. The sun was bright today, despite the growing chill of Autumn in the air. He squinted at the fruit laden trees around him and smiled. Ever since he'd started taking his lunches on this bench, he'd understood why Dr. Livingston had enjoyed coming out here nearly every day.

The place was always quiet and serene, a retreat from the busy and driven environment of the lab. It was always refreshing. He regretted not joining

his old mentor before on his walks, before he was gone.

They said he died from a massive stroke, but Jordan couldn't buy that. He had been *sitting* on the bench, not something a stroke victim would be able to do. He looked too tranquil, too relaxed, almost as if he had just drifted peacefully to sleep. He had never heard of anyone suffering such a severe stroke with that little agitation.

Jordan could also swear that he found Victor with a smile on his face.

The rat sighed and shook his head. He had wondered if his daily visits to the orange grove were a token of reverence to his old friend and mentor, or some method to help him understand that peculiar smile he had died with. It didn't really matter, he enjoyed coming here, and if that served as his personal tribute for Dr. Livingston, then so much the better.

The Biorg stood and stretched. He walked to one of the trees and spied an orange that would make a nice snack. He gripped the fruit and twisted, and to his surprise, a gigantic feather fell out of the tree and landed against his wrist.

He gripped its shaft and inspected it. It appeared to be some sort of hawk's feather, a primary, though it was unusually large, huge as a matter of fact! It was longer than his arm and as wide as his closed fist. He wondered what kind of hawk would grow to this size, or even if it was a hawk at all. Jordan glanced up at the sky and wondered if such a hawk could conceivably have an appetite for rat Biorg.

As he stared into the sky, the rat's thoughts turned unexpectedly to Dr. Livingston's gryphon statuette. His whiskers started to quiver in amusement. The rat tickled his nose with the end of the feather as a grin spread across his muzzle.

What an amusing fantasy!

He tossed the feather aside with a snicker, watching it flutter and land on the bench seat.

For a moment, Jordan looked at it quietly as it rested on the bench. On an impulse, he bent over and picked it up again, twirled it between his fingers, and carefully secured it into his jacket's vest pocket. The gigantic feather had reminded him of Dr. Livingston, and that in itself made it worth the effort to save it.

It would, at least, make for an interesting side project.





A Crack in the Wall

Kashra

The dim lights bent in a slow arc around the rim of my glass. Blue and red, and white in between, all glinting up at me as I stared down. It was that kind of focus we all have achieved before. I focused, not because I found anything particularly interesting in those reflections in the transparent material, but because I didn't wish to see the rest of the world around me.

It was inevitable, of course, that night and any night, that my attempt would fail. It was the sound I could not escape. The thumping bass would pound against my ears and I would try to tune it out. The reflections. I watched the reflections and tried so hard not to listen.

So vulgar, so obscene, the words crashed through my defenses. I couldn't help but pay them heed as they screamed relentlessly in my ears. My eyes left the glass and shot up at the stage not three feet from the end of my table.

There he was, in all his splendor, his lithe body twisting against the dirty metallic pole that shot down from the ceiling. He worshiped it like some pagan idol. Around and around he would dance to that music, his silvery-blue fur shimmering against the lights. I sighed and rested my muzzle against my palm. He wasn't watching me, not now.

The soft cream coloring of his underbelly was wet, dampened with a strange mixture of water and sweat. They would often spray him down before the show. The clients liked that look in him. Fresh — not soaked — but fresh. He was a master of his art, and it pained me to see how well he danced; how well he would entice the eyes of his audience; how they would all watch with the hope he would show them something more.

They wanted him. Even those that weren't watching, they all wanted him. They wanted to see under that scrap of leather tied to his waist. I smiled at their agony. He knew how to move, how to slide against that pole in just the way necessary to tease the most stoic of hearts. One inch was all it would take to give them what they wanted. One inch of a mistake, which he never made.

I returned to my glass, slumping in my chair. He had been dancing for almost an hour. I would never understand what kept him going. And for what? A measly few tips and a bed to sleep in. I knew how little they gave him, and I knew why.

The music switched, a slow, haunting rhythm flowing in over the frustrated banging of before. I could see him slip down, his chest heaving in exhaustion as his legs nearly crumpled beneath him, bringing him to his knees with his paws around the pole. The lights never stopped shining over him. I wondered sometimes, were they hot? Blinding? Could he even see me if he tried?

It wasn't over yet. He spread himself across the stage, crawling forward and looking from left to right around the audience. His eyes never fell on me. I wasn't in one of the prime seats. The primitive leather scrap hung uselessly from the thin string that held it to his waist, his treasure hidden now only by the calculated movement of his thighs.

I closed my eyes and smiled. As much as I hated the very idea of what he did, I couldn't help but fall victim to the spell he cast on the rest. He was beautiful, and I wanted him as badly as any other. The way he flowed across on all fours, the way he would look, the way he sucked the pity from their pockets. I couldn't imagine how he could muster such insincerity.

The hands reached out. They touched, they touched they touched they touched. Quarters... a dollar, maybe two. Each threw in its share as they felt through that beautiful fur. Their pink, bare fingers, some stubby, others slender, scraping against his skin. He writhed among them like a dog, enjoying a thorough petting. He rolled onto his back, paws in the air. They roamed across his belly and almost to that spot, but all knew better than that. Up the insides of his thighs, anywhere but that. It was disgusting.

I watched my glass again, but only for a moment before heard the silence. No, the music continued, but the men gathered around were silent now. The hands were frozen in place, and then, slowly removed, almost in unison. The wolf stared up at one, his eyes surprised. I craned my neck to get a better look.

A hundred. It was in his hand, crisp, brand new. One bill. I could barely make out the number, but it was unmistakable. What was that doing here?

"To see the rest," was all the man said, laying the hundred on the wolf's chest. I watched as everyone backed away. The crowds of humans, all easily

as surprised as the wolf lying there in the middle of the stage, all made room to see.

The man sat down near the stage, and the wolf flipped back onto his paws and knees, grabbing the bill from his chest and looking it over. "It's real," the man assured him. A pause, and then the wolf looked at me. Finally I could see him, his eyes confused and his paws trembling, looking to me.

Again I looked at the hundred, and back to the wolf. I closed my eyes from his gaze... and nodded. I listened now, the only one blind to the injustice, and I could hear the slap of leather against the floor of the stage. Even the music had stopped, as if to ensure that I heard it. I could feel their eyes on him. I sniffed sadly and buried my head in my arms. I could feel his discomfort, staring out at them without that leather's protection. He wasn't meant for this. This wasn't fair.



"Love?"

I looked up from the damp pillow my head had been resting against. My vision blurred from the tears, I could barely make out his form in the light.

"Love please, don't cry."

His voice was sweet, as always. "Did it happen?" I asked.

"Did what happen, love?" he replied gently, sitting himself on the small, creaky mattress and pressing his paw to my shoulder. "Why are you crying?"

"Did you really show them? Did they really see?" I asked, not knowing what else to think or say.

He stared down at me, his crystal blue eyes deeply considering my question. "You nodded, love. I thought... I thought it would be alright."

I whimpered quietly, another welling of tears flowing forth involuntarily.

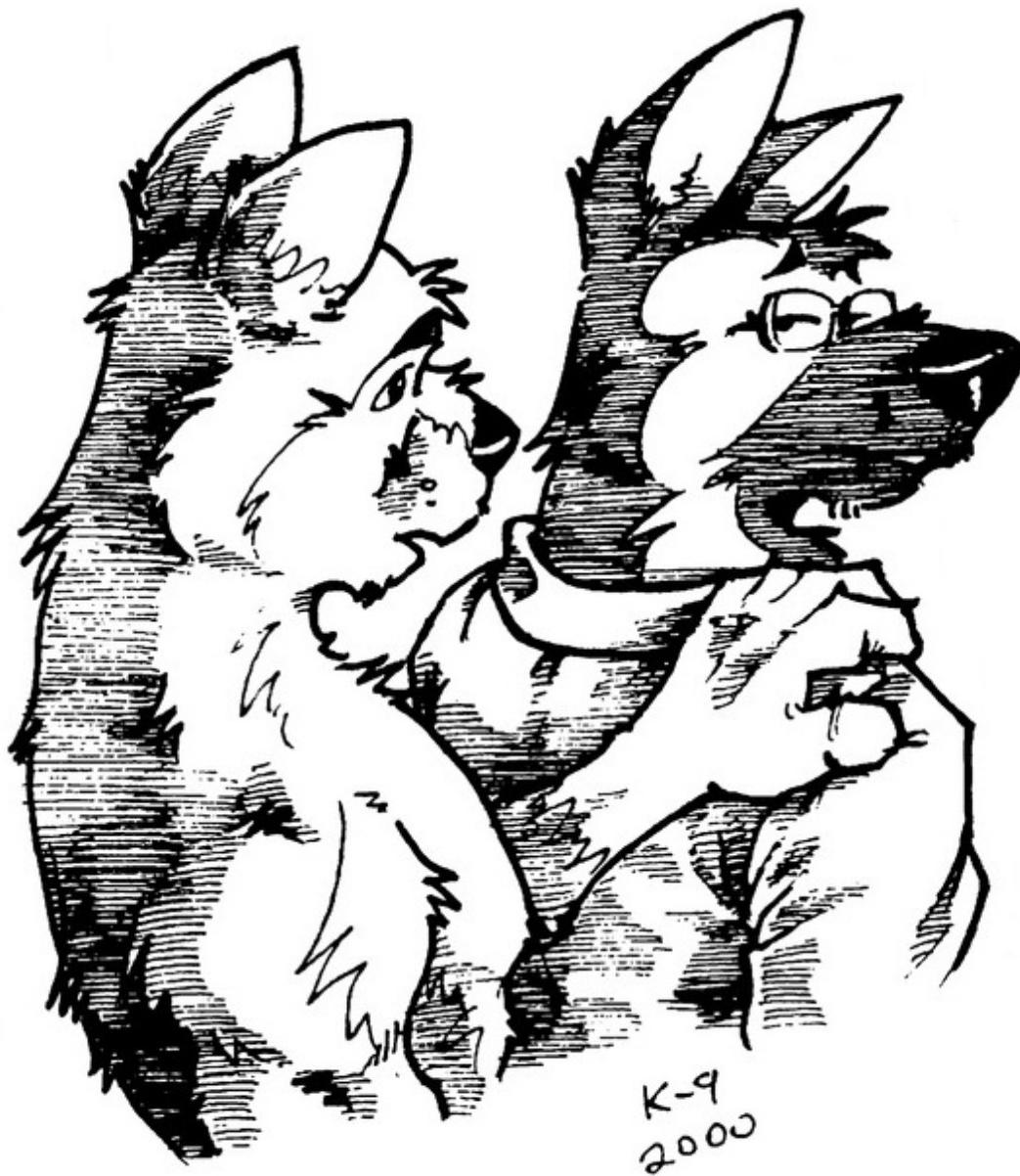
"I'm sorry love... I didn't mean to hurt you..." his paw squeezed my shoulder protectively. "I'm so sorry, I didn't know what you meant... and it was so much money. You know we needed it..."

"Why do you do this... why can't we just live away from all of this? I don't understand why..." I cried, my voice raising higher than I had expected.

"Hush..." he pressed his finger to my lips softly, and I did. "You know we aren't allowed to be that loud after hours, love."

"I'm sorry." I whispered, aware of my mistake.

"Don't say that. You know what I think of you saying sorry for something you never meant to do."



I simply watched him, wishing he would answer me.

"You know why I do this too, love." He sighed. "I've told you a hundred times. You don't get paid enough at work to support us both, and we need a place to stay, at least until we find a better place. The money is good..."

"...not for what you do... not for what they make you do..."

"Love please, we take what we can get, and we have to be happy with it. That's just the way the world works." His voice was so soft. I loved to listen to him. He always had the answers. "And you know someday it'll all be better."

"I could discover the cure for AIDS and I'd still be a 'lab aide.' What good is a degree if all I can do with it is give the credit to someone else? It will never get better!"

"Look!" he grabbed the hundred-dollar bill from the pocket of his tattered bathrobe, sounding exasperated. "I'll take you out to dinner tomorrow before the show, someplace nice? I promise you we'll have a great time, like we used to have."

I whimpered and reached out to grip at his robe, tugging at it weakly. "Look what you had to do for it, love... I saw them all, and that was something only I was meant to see. Isn't there anything we can have that they can't?"

He narrowed his eyes at me, and I had never felt him pierce so deeply into my heart. "Don't do this to me. You know that I hold our love as sacred as my life." His voice was nearly a growl. I retreated my paw, but he grabbed it and forced it against his chest. He was mad, I could tell. "I'm not mad at you, love. I could never be. But please, you know I don't like what I do any more than you do. Don't hurt me by reminding me of our sacrifice."

I nodded quietly, digging my paw between the folds of his robe and grasping at the soft fur of his chest. "I love you." I managed.

"I love you too, puppy." He smiled down at me, lifting his legs up onto the bed as he began to undo his robe. "And besides, there's always something you can have that nobody else will ever touch."

I couldn't help but smile as I trailed my paw down the center of his chest, feeling him shiver like nothing he ever did on stage. "I know... and no-one can take that from us."

That night was wonderful, in our old dilapidated bed. He reminded me of exactly what it felt like to be cherished like none other. He had worked so long to support us, and now he worked again, for me. It was the most pleasurable, passionate joining of hearts I had ever experienced. He had a way with me. A way that only true love could produce.



I took him up on his offer. The next day we were sitting across from each other at our favorite seafood spot. Wine? I didn't want any, but he nearly crammed it down my throat. Expensive. Lobster tail, shrimp cocktail — oh he knew how much I loved shrimp cocktail — the works. A dinner for two, and that hundred was gone as quickly as it came. Priceless.

Along the bay he stopped me, as we were walking back to the bar where he was to work again. Under a moon that reflected genuinely on the crisp, choppy water, he gave me a kiss I could never forget. I was afraid I would topple back over the wooden post he had pressed me against, meant to keep me from the waters below, but I soon forgot as I lost myself in his embrace. So warm, so protective, so perfectly tailored for me alone. He looked at me again after he had finished. Those eyes spoke without words.

I looked back at my glass as the minutes ticked by, the music pounding again. I still swooned from that kiss, and a smile played constantly across my muzzle even as he danced to please the human crowd. He was mine, and he loved me. That was all that I needed in this world. We could remain in debt forever, for all I cared. It wouldn't make any difference if we lived in this place the rest of our lives, as long as the rest of our lives were joined as one.

I watched him dance for the first time in my life. I let myself enjoy his art as he weaved around the pole, the leather flashing to protect him from those eyes. His beautiful movement, his fur, his eyes, oh his eyes, they shined at me now. He could see me tonight, and they flowed with passion. Passion I could understand, as I watched him lovingly.

He crawled forward again as the music slowed, and again the ritual was repeated. The man was present, again, but made no such offer as the night before. Instead he simply smiled. I couldn't tell, as I watched the scene from a slight distance at my table — was he smiling at him, or at me? The lights were too distracting for me to tell. I got up, glanced at the man, and left. I didn't want to see them defile my love, and I couldn't stop them. My glance was merely a warning. The wolf was mine.



The wolf grabbed my shoulders and spun me around, his eyes intense, but in a different manner. We stood near the entrance to our small room, and he pressed me against the wall. "Love..." his voice was worried, and confused.

"What?" I asked, trying to read it from his face.

"That man, the one from yesterday."

I growled instantly.

"Please love, listen to me," he begged, and I couldn't help but nod. "He made another offer tonight."

My heart sunk. "Did you accept?"

"No."

I quirked an eye at him. There had to be more. I could tell from his voice.

"Not yet."

"What?" I glared. "Not yet?!" I barely kept my voice down.

"Please love!" He pleaded. "Listen to me. Just listen to me."

"Love, you told me last night that I was special to you, that I was the only one for you. How can you be considering another proposal from this... this sick..."

"Listen to me!" he growled, pressing me against the wall harder than he probably intended, and causing me to squeal in pain as my shoulder ground into the wood. He quickly released me and apologized.

"I don't see why you even bother to talk to me about it, if you're so intent on accepting."

"I haven't even told you what he said yet!"

"Then tell me before I go to bed."

"I love you, please remember that? There's nobody—"

"—tell me." I wanted to be warm to him. His face begged me for it, but there was nothing but frustration now, welling in my belly.

He fidgeted and took a step back. "A hundred thousand."

I watched him closely, not sure what to make of that.

"In cash. He has it with him. In a briefcase. He showed me."

"But..."

"We can pay off all our debts and more."

"But..."

"You can afford to invest again, love. I know what happened before but you can do it this time, I trust you. We'll be able to live like we used to."

I felt like crying at the reminder of whose fault it was. I was the reason we were here to begin with. I was the one that had lost it all, for us both. "What..." I squeaked quietly.

He paused, knowing my question and shaking his muzzle. "I don't know what to do, love."

"Tell me." I managed, my voice stronger.

"One night, love. He wants one night alone."

I slid down the wall to crouch, knowing the answer before it had come and not wanting to hear it. "Last night..."

He crouched next to me, reaching out to grasp at my knee silently.

"You said it was something only I could have."

"I haven't said yes to it yet, love. I never said I wanted to do it."

I looked into his eyes again, searching for the truth. What did he want, then?

"I'm asking you, love, because I belong to you. There's nobody else in this world who is more capable of making this decision than you are. I don't have the right."

"You're asking me because you can't make up your mind." I snarled at him. "Because you don't want me to be mad at you when you say you want to do it."

"I don't, love. I really don't want to do it. I swear it."

"Then we won't. Tell him no."

He watched me to make sure I was serious. I was, though deep inside he knew I was wavering. I didn't know what to do either, but I wanted him. I loved him. I couldn't think of another man taking him from me... having him... for an entire night.

"Alright, love." He stood up over me, and slid his paw up against my cheek. "I love you, and I'd never do anything you didn't want me to. I'll be back in a minute, all right? And then you can have me again, just like last night."

I nodded quietly, trying not to look up at him. Did he want to do this? Maybe he didn't want to keep living this life... what kind of pain did he go

through every night, trying to make up for my mistake? "A hundred thousand?"

He nodded again, beginning to step away from me. "In cash, love. But I know where you're coming from. I think it's better just to say no."

"Where would I be? And what could he do?"

He turned again to me. "You aren't considering this, are you?"

"Where would I be?" I asked again, refusing to look back at him.

"The peephole, love. I don't want to be alone. You could watch us through the wall. I'd feel a lot better if you would, if you would keep an eye on me."

"And him?"

"Anything love... he wants to do anything. But he promised not to hurt me."

I shook my muzzle slowly. "I'd watch you two the entire night... through a crack in the wall."

"I couldn't do it if I was alone, love. I'm still not sure if I can at all."

"A hundred thousand."

He nodded again. I reached up at him, and he hoisted me back to my feet gently. "One night." We whispered to one another, and he held me again. I needed that so badly just then, to feel him against me, to know that he loved me. He cared for nobody but me. No matter what happened tonight, we would be together forever.

"I love you."



I closed the door quietly behind me, looking around the inky blackness of the closet-like room. There was a well-concealed crack in the wall through which a bit of light fell onto a wooden stool. This was where I was supposed to spend the night, watching my mate, my love, be used by some dirty human. At least he promised to use a condom. A hundred thousand dollars. Was it enough? I sat down and looked in.

My mate walked in not long afterwards. His slim form padded softly through the door, his luscious tail floating gently behind him. The man followed, making me scowl. I could see him eyeing my mate, following the simple curves of his body as the door was closed.

"Get rid of the robe." The man ordered gruffly, as he set the briefcase down on the bed and opened it, displaying the many bills stacked up neatly inside. "I'm sure this'll be more than enough to make up for what I'm going to do to you."

"No pain." My mate reminded him as the robe slipped from his shoulders, puddling on the floor about his ankles. I looked up and down his nude form, and how comfortable he seemed. What was he thinking? How did he feel, doing this to make up for my own mistake?

The man smiled and nodded. "I wouldn't hurt you, wolf. If you cooperate, then you know this will be painless."

My mate nodded quietly in submission, though I knew he didn't believe a word of it. "Well, you have a night, sir."

"That I do." The man surveyed his purchase. I could only imagine how it felt, knowing that two sets of eyes were upon my mate, watching his every move. He was calm and composed, standing still and alert, noble as the day I met him. "I've got the condoms you wanted."

"Thank you, sir. My mate want—"

"—your mate doesn't exist here, wolf."

"Excuse me?" my love nearly glanced back at the crack in the wall, but stopped himself before he was too obvious.

"He doesn't exist. Not when you're with me. Not tonight. Tonight you're just a very expensive whore." My fists clenched listening to the degrading words. Then take your money elsewhere.

My mate seemed to have a similar reaction, stepping back towards the wall and growling. "If we're going to do this, you're going to have to respect me for who I am. I didn't agree to be demeaned."

The man put his hand on the briefcase, closing it slowly and grinning. "Big words for a whore. Who taught you to talk like that?" he laughed as he patted the soft leather that encased our fortune. "I'll find someone else then, if you're not willing to play my game."

My mate hesitated; I could feel him wavering in his resolve. I still felt it, strongly burning within my heart. This wasn't right, just say no. It'll be alright, we'll make it through another way. Don't let him talk to you like that.

"Just a game?" my mate asked the man as he prepared to leave.

"For tonight. It'll all be over in the morning, and I'll be gone." The man assured him. "But you have to play along, all night, or no money."

My mate shook his muzzle. "The moment I touch you that money is mine." He insisted. "I'm not going through any of this without knowing my mate will have that in his paws by morning."

I whined softly. Why did I ever say yes to this? I didn't want to watch this. I didn't want to hear it.

"Deal." The man shrugged. "Then here are the rules. I call you whatever the fuck I want, and you do whatever the fuck I tell you, and I won't hurt you."

My mate flattened his ears to his head. Nobody had ever spoken to him that way before. Was this what he was going through the entire night? Was this what I would have to watch?

I could faintly hear the sound of the man's undressing. "Now get on all fours like you were meant to be, and fish the condom out of my pocket." He ordered, stepping out of his jeans as if shedding his skin. I couldn't bare the sight of him in his true form, a rapist in every sense of the word.

My mate did as he was told, and crawled up next to the discarded pants, tail low. He nosed through them as the man stood over him, that grin still adorning the rapist's ugly face. I pressed my paws to the wall and leaned in closer to the crack, watching and wishing for it to end.



Minutes later he was doing it. His eyes were closed, and his body moved sensually, all to entertain this man's eyes. He didn't have to do all that. He could have just done what was asked of him. There was no reason for him to throw in all the extras. I grimaced as I watched him. I could almost feel him, like I had the night before. Now this disgusting creature was taking it from him, and me. He was stealing it.

Why would he have done all that for the money? I couldn't understand how he would live through all that shame for the money. We were happy where we were, why did we need to change? I knew he had been happy with me, didn't I? He always said he took the job for me, so that we could live together.

But as I watched him my own thoughts wandered to doubt. He didn't look any different now than when he was with me. I couldn't feel that passion in him, but who was to say the man couldn't either? He was doing such a good

job; I could see it in the man's expression. My mate was pleasuring him beyond all belief.

And enjoying it. I wouldn't accept it at first, but as the long minutes dragged on and I continued to watch him, I couldn't help but understand the sinking truth. Just as he looked when he was dancing on stage, how he tempted the audience to lust for him, he did the same to this man. He gave it all to him, he did all that was asked of him, and more. I had always believed he didn't enjoy dancing for those people, but he had never showed his own resentment. Could he have enjoyed that too?

I wiped my eyes and looked at the dark floor, rubbing my nose on my sleeve. "How could you..." I whispered, dejectedly. Everything he had told me, everything he had done to make me feel so special, it could all have been an act, just as he was acting for this man, and just like he acted on stage. Who was I, what had I given him, that made his act for me so special?

I stood softly, trying not to make a sound as I looked away from the crack in the wall. I couldn't watch him act out this man's fantasy any longer. I wished that the morning would make it all better, but I knew that even then I could never believe him. I could never feel that sincerity that I thought was reserved for me. I closed the door.

The night dragged on, and I sat at the empty bar, alone. The digital clock stared down at me silently. I wallowed in self-pity until three in the morning, but even then it was not late enough. I was tired, and I continued to think of what sick dreams were being played out in the room I had shared with the one I had loved. Still three hours left for me to sit and remember all that I had just lost.

I thought of his kiss, on the harbor. He had been so kind to me. There was so much that he had shared with me, and I had given my heart to him. How could he have possibly faked it all? Could he have? No man on earth could fake that kiss. Those eyes, no man could look at me that way, and I could never feel the same without him. And right now, he was alone with that man, when I had promised I would stay with him.

Three more hours? No, I wouldn't allow it. It had to stop now. His body was not meant to be used in this way. I had abused his love. I had sold him off to a fucking human. I had to save him. There was no way this would continue any farther.

I ran to our room. The door was shut, of course, but there was never a lock. The dim light filtered through from underneath, and I couldn't hear anything on the other side. Was it over? I turned the knob and opened it, stepping inside.

I stumbled back against the frame. My breath caught in my throat. Everything around me seemed to stab through my skin, and a cold hand clutched my neck, even as I pressed my paws against my heart. The light, the bed, the man, the briefcase, the crack in the wall. It all stared at me, hateful, cold, overbearing. The gun. The red streak near the crack where my mate's paw had dragged, the crimson puddle in which he laid, the crude leather scrap, now tied about his muzzle to keep him quiet. The man, lying against the wall, half of his head taken by his own gun.

I couldn't move. Those crystal eyes, staring blankly now up at the crack in the wall. I knew what they didn't see. I knew what they should have seen, what they wanted to have seen, before they lost that sparkle. The outstretched hand, caked in blood, its forefinger still pressed against the wall. I finally could see what he had meant for me to know. My eyes read across the wall, the dripping red marks that could have been letters, small and wavering, barely visible in the dim light as they trickled down the wall.

Forever.

I cried so hard I could feel my stomach lurching inside of me. My legs carried me into the puddle, the sickening splash of the stuff the only sound as I crouched next to his limp body, what had been so full of movement not an hour before. "I'm sorry love... I'm... I'm so sorry..." I sobbed, my paws wet as they turned his body over to find the terrible wound in his chest. He was gone, beyond all hope. There was nothing left inside of that shell.

I crouched there until my heart was dry and there was nothing more for me to offer from my eyes. They stung hotly as my body continued, expecting them to produce yet more tears, but none would come anymore. I could almost hear him, as I apologized over and over again. I knew what he would have said to me. I knew he didn't want me to be this way.

My head turned to the bed, where that briefcase lay, guilty with its sin. You know what I think of you saying sorry for something you never meant to do. I never meant to do. "I never meant it love... I wish I could take it back... I wish... I wish I was there for you..." my voice cracked and I could barely tell if I was even speaking. I stood, slowly, finding that his cold body was beginning to make me queasy.

I was alone as I looked between the briefcase and the gun, sitting in the limp, pink fingers of that man's hand. Why did I have to make this choice alone? If only he was there, I would forget the briefcase in an instant... if only... he could have helped me.

I slid my paws over the briefcase, the wet-ness beading up in red pools on the expensive leather. His life could not have been in vain. I couldn't let that happen. We would be together, forever, but I still had penance to pay for my crimes. In the end it would be okay. In the end, we would be one, and I would feel him again. But now, I would do as he wished of me.

I took the briefcase, I looked again at the bodies, and I ran.







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Mange

Michael H. Payne

Rain spattered the window, the glass cold against Jervy's nose. He pushed away, let himself fall from the back of the sofa onto its cushions. "It's not fair! We finally get to come to the farm, and all it does is rain!" He snagged a pillow with his claws and threw it, not caring where it landed.

A crash, a cry, and a hiss, and Jervy looked up to see his sisters jumping away from the Parchess board, colored pieces scattering everywhere. Lar just glared at him, but Syrris turned, her claws out. "That's it, hairball," she growled. "You're history."

"Aunt Tarin!" Jervy scrambled for the back of the sofa.

Sharp points caught his scruff, jerked him around to face Syrris's gritted teeth, her ears flat, her eyes black and narrow. "It's not bad enough we hafta spend a month on this stinking mushroom farm! Now you've gotta start—!"

"Aunt Tarin!"

Her claws dug deeper. "If you think that old weasel—"

"Old weasel, is it?" a voice asked from the hallway, and Jervy almost cheered to see Aunt Tarin, her weird fur all silvery in the firelight. "Syrris, put your brother down."

"But Aunt Tarin—!"

"But nothing." Aunt Tarin padded into the room. "If you kittens want to kill each other, you'll have to do it outside. Now put him down."

The pins in his neck gave a final jab; then Jervy was falling, his tail swinging to land him on his paws. He heard Syrris blow out a breath. "He's just been driving me crazy!"

"Well, that's what little brothers are for." Aunt Tarin squinted down at him. "Any casualties there, Jervy?"

"I didn't do anything. Aunt Tarin, I swear I didn't."

Syrris spun around. "You little—!"

"Enough!" Aunt Tarin's voice rang. "I cannot pretend to understand why your parents insisted you spend your vacation here." A smile curled her

snout. "All the years I've been married to your uncle, I still don't understand the feline mind." She cleared her throat. "Nonetheless, this experience is bound to be gruesome enough as it is, so let's try to buckle down and make the best of it."

Jervy stared. "You don't want us visiting, Aunt Tarin?"

Aunt Tarin smiled again. "Of course I want you visiting, kitten." She reached down and pulled Jervy up into a hug, her wonderful spicy scent tickling his whiskers. "How could I not want my favorite nephew to visit me?"

He heard Lar snicker. "Your only nephew, you mean."

"And so all the more precious." Aunt Tarin swung him around and settled Jervy into her lap, the firelight flashing from her glasses as she nodded toward Lar righting the game board. "Parchess? I didn't think anyone still played that."

"No one does," Lar said without looking up, "unless they're bored completely out of their skulls."

Syrris spread her paws. "It's so absolutely unreal! I mean, the only nets you guys're on are all news and weather:

I didn't think anyone still lived like this! What do you and Uncle Esh do for fun out here?"

"Yeah." Lar snickered again. "It's not like you can have kids or anything."

"And what a blessing that's been." Aunt Tarin ruffled the fur between Jervy's ears. "It allows me to lavish all my affections on my lovely nieces and my wonderful nephew."

His sisters groaned, and Aunt Tarin laughed. Jervy looked up at her. "Aunt Tarin, will it ever stop raining? I wanna go out and see those mushrooms you invented, the ones that move around in the trees. We saw a whole thing about them in school."

With a snort, Syrris picked up the dice. "If you're really lucky, worm, you get carried off by one of 'em."

"Hey!"

Aunt Tarin patted his head. "You never mind them, Jervy. We'll find something to do till the rain stops."

Jervy turned back to her. "Like what?"

Aunt Tarin rubbed her whiskers. "Perhaps a story?"

"Yeah!" Jervy wriggled in her lap. "One with humans and the Planetary Congress and everything!"

"Oh, a true story, then?"

"Yeah! The one where the Empress comes with her Armada and fights Captain Pulver!"

"What?" Aunt Tarin's brow wrinkled.

"It's in my coloring book." Jervy waved a paw to his pile of stuff. "I can't read it, but it has pictures of all these space ships and Pulver Station and everything, so I know what it's about."

Lar laughed from down on the floor. "Except he changes it every time."

"I do not!" Jervy swiveled around. "It's always the same 'cause it's history! Captain Pulver was on the station and the Empress attacked and Captain Pulver killed her and saved all the anthrops and humans in all of settled space!" He stuck his tongue out at her. "Right, Aunt Tarin?"

When Aunt Tarin didn't say anything, Jervy turned back to see her squinting down through her glasses. "What are they teaching in the schools these days?" she muttered. "To begin with, kitten, Captain Pulver lived many generations ago, back when our ancestors first came to this planet: Pulver Station may be named after him, but he died long before it was put into orbit. And the Empress, well, the Empress is still alive somewhere out among the stars."

"Hold it." Lar looked up. "The Empress was killed after the Battle of Pulver Station. Everybody knows that."

Aunt Tarin raised a claw. "What everybody knows and what really happened are not always the same thing: you'll learn that if you get any older. I happen to know that the Empress did survive, and I know it because I was there."

"You..." Jervy swallowed. "You were on Pulver Station when the Empress attacked?"

"Of course not! I was right here on the farm."

He blinked. "But I thought you said—"

"Do you want the story?" Her mouth squeezed thin under her whiskers. "Or don't you?"

Folding his paws like his mother had taught him, Jervy looked up at Aunt Tarin. "I do, please."

"That's better. Well, the day after the Battle was also rainy, I recall." She looked down at Jervy. "I'd been watching it all on the vid: the Empress's Armada surrounding the planet, the Planetary Congress refusing to give in to her demands, the Federal Fleet breaking through her lines, the crew on the station overwhelming her troops. I even saw live the footage they always show of the Empress activating that cargo trans-mat and leaping into it."

"And a transmat, well, everyone figured that was the end of her, even her own ships: they surrendered to the Feds ten minutes after." Aunt Tarin spread her paws. "That was when I realized I was itching all over."

Jervy blinked at her. "Itching?"

Aunt Tarin pursed her lips. "Yes, well, back in those days, kitten, I didn't take very good care of myself, always had some sort of skin condition for your uncle to treat. And with the entire planet under threat of nuclear destruction all week, I hadn't noticed how much I'd been itching, how far the scale had spread over my skin, how many bloody chunks of fur were now littering the floor."

"Ewww!" Jervy couldn't keep his ears up.

"Exactly." Aunt Tarin poked his nose. "So, with the emergency over and the Empress gone, I threw on my cloak and rucksack and made my way through the drizzle into Falkirk. Your uncle looked me over, nodded his head, and said, 'You'll be happy to know it's not mange.'"

"Well, stretched out on his examining table, my skin raw and painful even with the anti-itch he'd sprayed on me, I told him, 'When you're scratching your fur out in bloody chunks, Esh, that's mange in my book.'"

She smiled down at Jervy. "The look he gave me! 'Just because,' he started lecturing me, 'you grow medicinal mushrooms, Tarin, doesn't mean you have the expertise to diagnose the conditions they treat. Mange, after all, is caused by several easily recognizable parasites, none of which—'"

"I raised my paws in defeat. 'All right,' I said, 'I'm sorry. Just give me a prescription, unless you're planning to bore the stuff off me.'"

"He gave me a half-lidded look. 'My best prescription has you heading south for the winter to get some sun in your fur, preferably in the company of the handsome town doctor.'"

Syrris laughed from the floor. "Uncle Esh said that?"

"I'm afraid so." Aunt Tarin sighed. "I asked him, as I always did, 'And how does the handsome town doctor recommend I meet my expenses this

year if I abandon the crop?"

"And he with a wave of his paw replied as he always did: 'Well, you would marry the handsome town doctor, let him cater to your every whim, sell off that old bog of a farm, and move into his palatial mansion-like two room apartment.'"

"Whoa." Lar looked up. "That's how Uncle Esh proposed?"

Aunt Tarin shook her head. "He'd been proposing to me in a variety of ways ever since we'd met back in basic training."

Syrris had turned away from the Parchess board. "And what? You kept turning him down?"

"I did, yes." Aunt Tarin gave a shrug, the firelight dancing in her silvery fur.

"I'd tell him, 'Why don't you find some nice little feline to settle down with?' And he'd reach out, take my paw, and say, 'I don't want anyone nice, Tarin. I want you.'"

His sisters laughed, but Jervy squirmed. "C'mon, Aunt Tarin: when does the Empress—"

"I'm getting to her, kitten." She rubbed his ears. "I couldn't leave the crop, and I certainly couldn't imagine that your uncle was serious: the province's most eligible bachelor caring about a mangy little weasel like me?" A tiny smile tugged her whiskers, and she shook her head. "I just insisted he give me the prescription and told him, 'Maybe after the season's over, I can take some time off.'"

"He made that little clicking sound of his, shook a claw at me, and gave me some ointment to rub into my fur along with a packet of leaves to mix into a thickglove mushroom stew over the next few nights. I tucked the stuff into my rucksack and pulled out two jars of panashen mushrooms for his bill."

Jervy nodded. "Those're the kind they use for fevers, aren't they. Aunt Tarin?"

She patted his head again. "Very good, Jervy. Well, I hurried out into the drizzle, not wanting to waste any more of his time. And, of course, I was only halfway home when the spray wore off and the itching started up again."

"So when I came to Crandish Bog, I was in no mood to take the long way around: not when I could save half an hour by cutting through. In I plunged,

the only sound the rain pattering over the branches of the hemstocks."

Aunt Tarin blinked, and her eyes seemed to focus on something far away, "I was about halfway across when I first heard the swearing. Not unusual out on the bogs, I'll admit, but this swearing was in High Galactic, a language I hadn't heard since basic training."

"I stopped and stared into the mists. All I could think of, I recall, was that some human pilot, either from the Fleet or the Empress's Armada, had perhaps been shot down over the bogs during the battle the previous day."

"Now, I know several local farmers who won't venture into Crandish Bog, and a spacer, used to gleaming stations and orbiting cities..." Aunt Tarin shrugged. "I gritted my teeth and headed for the shouting. Around the banyons and marsh poplars I wove, and finally I found myself coming out onto the shore of Tersis Fen, one of the big mud flats out in the Bog."

"And there, a few meters out, already sunk to her waist, screaming and cursing, her hair and battle garb soaked with mud, was a human woman. The Empress: I recognized her from the news coverage I'd been watching all week."

"Hold it." Lar had settled against the wall. "Nothing alive can survive a transmat: we just did that chapter in physics. The way it disrupts the electro-chemical —"

"So I told myself." Aunt Tarin nodded. "I can hardly tell one human from another, but even through the mud, that jaw line, that nose, those eyes, they seemed to be those I'd been seeing on the vid all week..."

"Well, I couldn't be sure, so I finally decided that, whoever she was, I couldn't just let her subside into the fen. I dug the rope out of my rucksack and called in my best High Galactic, 'You keep flailing around like that, you'll just sink faster. I'll throw you a rope.'"

"Well, up snapped her head, and she sputtered out, 'Who the hell are you?!"'



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"'A farmer,' I replied. I tied the rope to the nearest tree, shouted, 'Here it comes,' and tossed it into the bog."

"She grabbed it and hauled herself to solid ground. I stuck out a paw to help her up the bank, but when her eyes came up to mine..." Aunt Tarin stopped, that far away look coming over her again. "I tell you, her eyes burned like coals, actually glowed a dull orange in the gray light."

Jervy felt his hackles rising. "Glowed?"

"Oh, yes, kitten." Her voice grew quiet. "All week the vid had been full of stories about these powers the Empress was supposed to have — to heal illness and cure disease if you listened to her partisans, to fry people's brains and control their actions if you listened to the Feds." Aunt Tarin shrugged. "All propaganda, I'd figured."

She puffed out a spicy breath. "But when those burning eyes fixed on me..." Jervy felt her shudder. "I knew this was the Empress, that the stories had to have some truth to them, that, impossible as I knew it was, she had survived a transmat shunt and was right here in front of me."

"She slapped my paw aside and panted in the same voice I'd heard all week issuing ultimatums, 'I'll shoot myself before I'll let some stinking, crawling little throp help me!'"

Jervy forced a swallow. "Wow..."

"Exactly." Aunt Tarin nodded. "By then she had climbed onto the bank beside me, had tossed the rope away and risen to her feet, but her legs buckled, and she dropped to her hands and knees in the mud. She gave a groan, her sides heaved, and she proceeded to throw up onto the tree roots."

Jervy wrinkled his nose. "The Empress never throws up in my stories, Aunt Tarin."

"Nonetheless." Aunt Tarin shrugged. "The self-styled Ruler of All Settled Space puked her guts out all over the hem-stocks. After a moment of coughing, she raised her eyes — just regular human eyes now, white with circles of blue and a black dot in the center — and said, 'You. Farmer. I'll be using your farm as my base of operations while I'm on this miserable mud ball. You'll take me there now!'"

"I tucked my rope back into my sack. 'I will?' I asked."

"Fire burst over her eyes again. 'Yes,' she said, one hand moving down to her side holster. 'You will.'"

Jervy caught his breath, heard his sisters do the same, but Aunt Tarin smiled. "Of course, I'd already noticed that her holster was empty, so I just stood and watched her fumble at her belt and at the ground next to her."

"Finally she stopped, the glow in her eyes flickering a bit, and the rain chose that moment to open up, the air suddenly cold and thick with water. I was itching and shivering and all I wanted was to go home, get my ointment on, and lie down for a while. But what was I supposed to do with her?"

"She stayed on her hands and knees and fired that glare at me, and after a minute, I sighed. 'If we have to have a staring contest,' I told her, 'we might as well do it inside.'"

"I started through the marsh, heard her squish out of the mud and follow, and I started considering: it wouldn't be difficult to lose her out here. The Feds already thought she was dead, and I doubted she could last a night on the bogs."

"But, well..." Aunt Tarin stopped, focused on Jervy, her glasses glinting. "Tell me, what do you do when you find a web of longlegs in the house?"

Jervy blinked, but before he could answer, he heard Lar snicker. "Jervy? He usually screams for Mom or Dad."

"Yeah." Syrris blew out a breath. "But he won't let anyone squish 'em. Those bugs are, like, his best friends, and he's still scared to death of 'em, aren't you, worm?"

"I'm not scared of 'em!" Jervy looked up at Aunt Tarin. "It's just...whenever I try to pick one up to take him back outside, I always tangle his legs and some of 'em even break off sometimes. So I hafta yell for Mom or Dad to come and take 'em outside 'cause they can do it better."

Aunt Tarin ruffled the fur between his ears. "You're lucky. My mother used to yell at me all the time for carrying longlegs back into the bogs. 'Just stomp on 'em!' she'd shout out the window after me. 'They'd stomp on you if they was bigger and had half a chance!'" Aunt Tarin shrugged. "But I'm just not built that way."

She sighed. "So I ended up leading her back here. Of course, the house was much smaller then, just the kitchen and that side room we use for storage now, but the Empress didn't seem to mind: she staggered in behind me and fell with a groan onto my mattress."

"I threw my cloak into the corner, got a fire going, fished the ointment from my rucksack and slathered it over the red and itchy patches in my fur.

The packet of leaf stalks I put into the pantry in the kitchen, and when I came back out, the Empress had pulled herself into the corner by the fireplace, my blanket wrapped around her muddy battle garb. 'Damn transmats,' she was muttering, her breathing labored. 'Never thought it'd be that hard to — ' She stopped suddenly, her eyes wide and staring at me. 'Keep away from me, throp,' she panted out. 'I don't want whatever diseases you've got.'"

"I blinked at her for a moment before I realized what she meant. 'Oh,' I said, 'it's just the mange. You've no fur, so I don't suppose you have to worry about it.'"

"The mud had dried her hair into grimy rows, and even though her eyes weren't glowing, they shone like glass beads: fever, I guessed, from the way she shivered. 'Do you know who I am?' she managed to say. 'Do you have any idea, you slime sucking animal, who I am?'"

"Well, I didn't see that that called for a reply, so I just took a step forward to tend the fire."

"Well, flame absolutely burst over her eyes, and she bunched back into the corner, hissing, 'Stay away!'"

"Of course, when I went past her to the fire, she relaxed a bit, though her teeth were clenched when she said, 'A transmat'd kill anyone normal, but me, I'll just need a while to get my innards settled, so you... you keep your distance till I'm ready to deal with you.'"

"She closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the wall, but her breathing didn't slow at all. I lowered myself onto a cushion beside the vid, and while I'm no doctor, even I could tell she was suffering from a variety of basic system shocks: exposure, fatigue, probably even plasmaxis judging by the blaster burns all over her battle armor. And who knew what shunting through the trans-mat had done to her?"

"I was hoping she would pass out so I could go fetch your uncle, but every time she shivered, her eyes popped open. 'Damn Feds,' she said after a time. She focused on me and tapped her forehead. 'They're scared of me 'cause of this, you know. And they damn well should be. I can make 'em jump when I say jump, make 'em scream when I say scream.' She blinked then and asked, 'You. Farmer. You male or female?'"

"I told her I was female, and she shrugged and laughed, the shrug becoming a spasm of twitching, the laugh a stream of coughs. 'Too bad,' she

got out finally. 'If you were male, I could've made you fall in love with me.' She smiled, dry mud cracking across her cheeks. 'But I guess I can make you my devoted servant, make you fight to the death to protect me, obey my slightest whim, love me like...like a dog loves its mistress.' Her laugh turned to coughs again, real hacking coughs this time, almost knocking her to the floor."

"Now, I certainly didn't feel like her devoted servant, nor was I planning to die defending her any time in the near future. But I couldn't just sit there. So I said, 'Well, as your devoted servant, I recommend you eat something!'"

"She opened her eyes partway, and they glistened in the firelight. 'What?' she murmured, her voice cracking."

"I put on what I hoped was a devoted expression. 'Yes. Let me mix something up, something so you'll feel better!'"

"Her cheek twitched. 'Stay away,' she hissed."

"I held up a paw. 'But how can I be your devoted servant if you don't let me serve you anything?'"

"That made her stop. 'Very well,' she said slowly. 'You may serve me, my creature!'"

"I stood up and bowed, then slipped into the kitchen." Aunt Tarin smiled slightly. "Now, you've got to promise not to repeat this to your uncle. He'd never let me live it down if he heard I'd taken it upon myself to diagnose her."

"But, well, she needed treatment, and I had to stabilize her before I could head into town for your uncle. So I mixed together a stew of thickglove and panashen mushrooms for whatever she may have caught out in the bogs, some ragmuffins to calm her down, and some peppersalts to help her sleep. I stirred it all together with a few basic spices, dished it into a bowl, and carried it out into the front room."

"She was still propped against the fireplace wall, her eyes shining as she croaked out, 'Stay away' once more."

"I stopped and gave her another bow. 'But mistress, you wanted something to eat, remember?'"

"At that, her stomach growled so loudly I could hear it from where I stood. 'Of course,' she said. 'You may have the honor of approaching me, my creature!'"

Aunt Tarin shook her head. "Well, I fought down the temptation to dump that bowl right over her head, knelt down in front of her, and started spooning in the stew."

"She swallowed the first mouthful, the second, the third, and already, her breathing was slowing, her body unclenching, the veins and tendons in her neck settling down, the lines smoothing out over her forehead."

"With her fourth mouthful, her hands let the blanket around her fall, and I began wondering. This was my mother's standard medicinal stew, and I could remember it taking as many as two bowls before it kicked in properly."

"Well, it hit me at the same time her head lolled back against the wall with a thump." Aunt Tarin spread her paws. "Humans don't use our mushrooms as medicine: they may have put our ancestors together however many centuries ago, but we're no more similar to them than you kittens are to old Earth cats. Panashens and ragmuffins are fairly potent, and I had no idea what they might do to a human body."

"By this time, I couldn't even tell if she was breathing, her head tipped back like her neck had snapped, her mouth open, her eyes closed. My fur stood on end, and I grabbed her shoulders, shook her a few times, my face right up close to catch any flicker of her eyelids, any twitch of her nostrils, anything to let me know she was still alive."

"And then...then her whole body twitched, her eyes snapped open, and..."

Aunt Tarin stopped, and Jervy realized he'd been holding his own breath. "And?" he heard Lar ask from the floor.

"And I'm not really sure." Aunt Tarin's voice was quiet against the rain at the window, the crackling of the fire. "It was as if...as if her eyes had suddenly become windows, and I was looking out through them at a terrible storm: lightning flashing, rain howling, thunder roaring. And then the storm burst out of her eyes and swept me up, whirled me into it, the wind spinning, snapping and biting at my fur, bloody clumps tearing away and whisking off into the clouds. I tried to scream, but the air just whipped from my lungs; I couldn't find up or down, couldn't see or think or hear anything but the fury everywhere around me."

"Then...then other things came swirling past, things I recognized in the lightning that crashed from all sides: the red truck my brother had always played with, the pocketknife my father had given me on my sixth birthday,

the plaid hat I'd worn when we went to the mountains one spring after a really good harvest, the shells I collected on the beach at Uncle Charl's house, objects from my childhood sweeping and tumbling through the gale around me."

"And there were other objects, objects I'd never seen before: the pistol I'd used to escape from the Federal Work Camp I'd grown up in, the syringe of nixosine that had kept the grinding headaches away until I was fourteen and a triple dose had seemed to make my brain explode, the stinking mattress in the dingy cellar where I'd first realized I could force other people to do things just by thinking about it, the jewelry and the coins and the credit cards I'd gathered that first week. All objects from a childhood, but... but not my childhood, not a childhood that I knew anything about."

"Except..." Aunt Tarin seemed to struggle for the words. "Except that I did know it. I was living it, or at least being wrapped in it. This was her childhood playing out around me, mixing with mine, the objects of our individual pasts swirling together all along the whole storm front."

"And the faces in the wind: human faces I'd never seen, but I know each and every one of them because I had killed them all, wrapped my mind around theirs and made them work for me till I hadn't needed them anymore, pulling at them till they crumpled; and the other faces, my family, your uncle, Rathburne and his wife from the next farm over, Collidi and Belfas and everyone I'd known in school..."

"And in among them, whipping among all the faces and objects, was every longleg I'd ever caught in the house and set free among the hemstocks, their webs streaming silvery behind them and stretching from one end of the storm to the other, wrapping the whole vision together, tying it all to me, sweeping us all whirling into the storm."

"Faster and faster, these memories kicking in the wind, thunder tearing at my ears. I tried to cover my head with my paws, but I couldn't tell where my head was, let alone my paws. Then one last massive thunderclap slammed against me, the clouds shattering, and..."

"And then I sneezed, the stink of human sweat in my nose. I blinked at the images from the storm still flashing behind my eyelids and tried to stand, but something had hold of me. I raised my head and saw that I was curled up in the Empress's arms, her head bent over and resting on my shoulder. I couldn't begin to imagine what had just happened, and after a moment, I managed to wriggle from her grasp onto the floor."

"She was still breathing, nice and deep as if she were asleep. Embers glowed in the fireplace, and the clock on the vid said it was after midnight. Nearly eight hours had slipped away somewhere, but I could only stumble across the room to my mattress and drop onto it like a stone."

"When I next looked at the vid's clock, another eight hours had gone by, the room still warm, rain soft at the roof and windows. The Empress lay asleep against the fireplace wall, her head slumped onto her chest, mud caked in her hair, until I climbed unsteadily to my paws. She gave a snort then, up snapped her head, and normal human eyes blinked at me for a moment. 'I know you, don't I?' she asked in a low voice."

"But all I could do was stare. Looking across the room at her was like..." Again, Aunt Tarin seemed to be looking for the words. "Like looking in a mirror and seeing someone else, someone who is and isn't you at the same time. But it wasn't strange; it was as if I were looking in the mirror and expecting to see someone different."

She stopped, and Jervy had to say, "What?"

Aunt Tarin smiled and rubbed his ears. "I don't know how to explain it, kitten, and the Empress looked every bit as confused as I felt. 'Why do I know you?' she asked at last."

"It took me a moment to find my tongue. 'You spent the night here,' I told her. 'I found you out in the —'"

"She waved a hand. 'No, no, no,' she said, then pressed her hands to the sides of her head. 'Why do I know you in here? How did you get inside me?'"

"All I could do was shrug and say, 'I honestly don't know.'"

"'Nonetheless,' the Empress began, then she stopped and laughed, dried mud patterning to the floor. 'I've never used the word "nonetheless" before in my life!' She pointed a shaking finger at me. 'Your magic mushrooms, they opened my mind, made me wrap you up and take you in. And I'm...' She struggled to her feet with another laugh and leaned against the wall. 'I'm in you now, too, aren't I?'"

"I had no idea what she was talking about. 'I think I'd better get you to the doctor — I said at last.'"

"Well, she just laughed again, pushed herself away from the wall, and spread her arms. 'Why?' she asked. 'For the first time in years, maybe the first time in my life, I feel good.' She staggered the few steps across the

room and fell to her knees in front of me, her hands resting on my shoulders. 'And it's all thanks to you, Tarin.'"

"I was going to ask her how she knew my name, but I suddenly realized that, well, that I knew her name, something I'd never seen or heard on any of the news broadcasts."

"Wow..." Jervy couldn't believe his ears. "You...you really know the Empress's name. Aunt Tarin?"

She laughed. "Oh, now, it's not as exciting as all that, Jervy." Her smile faded. "But it was the only thing she got from her mother: her mother died giving birth to her in the work camp, did you know?" Aunt Tarin quickly shook her head. "No, of course you didn't. But her name is Esme."

Jervy blinked. "Esme?"

"Yes. And all her other memories lay stacked inside my head, everything that had formed and driven this person who had nearly conquered all of settled space. It left me breathless, the feelings coursing through me as she stroked my ears and said, 'So, one mange cure deserves another, I'd say.'"

"I was staring right into her eyes, and the fire flashed there before I could look away. A wave of dizziness passed through me; then she was standing, stepping to the doorway, reaching for the knob. 'Well, I've got plans to change,' she said, looking back with a grin. 'Maybe I'll stop in again some day — but no, I don't suppose that'd be too smart. But I won't forget you, Tarin.'"

Aunt Tarin stopped, blinked a few times. "It was like watching your image in a mirror turn and walk away from you. 'Wait!' I called, scrambling out after her."

'Where will you go? Aren't they going to be looking for you?"'

"She had already reached the first row of hemstocks, and she turned, gave me a smile and a shrug. 'I don't know,' she said. 'I wouldn't blame them if they were, though: I've got a lot to answer for. Just how I'll answer for it, I haven't decided yet, but, well, I think you'll be the first to know!' She waved to me, then she was gone into the bogs."

Aunt Tarin was looking far away again, but after a moment, she shook her head and came back. "And as I stood there in the rain, I realized that, for the first time in weeks, I wasn't itching anywhere. That night I noticed the bristles of new fur coming in, all silvery like it is now, and when I went into town to show your uncle, he was amazed at how fast his ointment had

worked. I just smiled and said the mushrooms must be pretty good this year, too."

"And when my examination was done and your uncle, as usual, asked me to marry him, I said yes." A smile spread at her whiskers. "I've often wished I'd brought a camera: the expression on his face when I accepted was the most comical one I've ever seen him make."

Jervy smiled, too: Uncle Esh did make some pretty funny faces.

"Wait," he heard Syrris say from the floor. "You accepted? You'd just, like, turned him down the day before, hadn't you?"

"I had, yes." Aunt Tarin's eyeglasses shone. "But the day before, I'd thought living alone in a two-room shack in the middle of some stinking sump was all I needed, all I deserved, really. Standing in the rain, though, watching the Empress go, I realized that something had changed in me, and that I, well, that I wanted more now."

Her voice got very quiet. "It was the first time, I think, that I had ever wanted anything. All of a sudden, I wanted a life. I wanted the best mushroom farm these bogs had ever seen. And, yes, I wanted your uncle." She smiled. "And now, I have a lovely house, a profitable business, a wonderful husband, two sweet nieces, and the finest nephew in all of settled space." She gave Jervy a hug. "Who could possibly want anything more than that?"

Jervy hugged her back, then saw over her shoulder that the rain wasn't splashing against the window any more. "Aunt Tarin! The rain's stopped!"

She swiveled her head around. "So it has."

"Hold it," Lar said: Jervy turned to see her sitting with her arms folded. "Even if I buy all that — and I'm not saying I do — why d'you think she's still alive?"

Aunt Tarin tapped her forehead. "She's stayed with me. I can't say exactly where she is, but I'll stake any three of my patents that she's had something to do with the Eridani Pact, the Delosian Peace Accords, the treaties that ended the Brigari-Tufu war: her way of making up for the destruction she caused." She shrugged, then looked back at Jervy. "And now you know the true story. What do you think about that?"

Jervy nodded. "It was okay, I guess."

"You guess?" Aunt Tarin cocked her head.

"Well, it's just that now, if the Empress is a good guy, I'm gonna hafta change all the stories in my coloring book!"

Her mouth went sideways. "I'm sure you'll manage, Jervy. And just think of all the stories you can tell about her out in space helping people."

"Yeah, I s'pose." He looked out the window. "Can we go see the mushrooms now. Aunt Tarin?"

"Of course." She set him on the floor and rose from the sofa. "Let's find you some boots, shall we?"







XIAN JAGUAR



Many Years from Now part two

Tim Susman

Continued from Issue #1...

— *Editor*

She was tapping on the door before I was completely dry from the shower, so I answered the door with a towel wrapped around my waist. Marsha was in full shopping regalia, with her extra-large purse, short purple skirt that showed off her hips, all three earrings, and a tight halter top so the shaved rose pattern on her shoulder was visible.

"Whoa," she said. "I just came by to ask if I could borrow a towel."

I laughed. "Grab yourself a drink. I'll be out in ten minutes." I padded back to the bedroom, closed the door and stretched out under the dryer again.

"He didn't call yet, I guess," she called from the living room.

"Not yet," I called back. I heard her claws clicking on the hardwood until she settled into a chair.

I threw on some clothes as soon as my fur was dry: slacks and a casual work shirt. Sales people treat you better if you look like you have money. Terry and Misha met us at the mall, where we made the rounds of the department stores and hit a couple furniture stores. Misha kept draping himself across every sofa we looked at, and insisted I choose one that looked good under him. I finally settled on one that met everyone's approval (and didn't look too much like the old one), got my credit card out, and settled on a Tuesday delivery. We had lunch in the food court, then Marsha and I headed back to my apartment because I was anxious to wait for Ricky's call.

There was no message on the machine when we got back, so we settled down for the afternoon. We talked, watched TV, watched a movie, and the phone didn't ring. I cooked up a quick dinner, we had ice cream, watched another movie, and still the phone didn't ring. I started to get grouchy and snappish, and at about nine, I told Marsha she might as well go home. If

Ricky hadn't called by then, he wasn't going to call that day. She went, a bit reluctantly, but I was too angry and upset at Ricky by that point to be decent company at all.

I growled and paced around the apartment for a while before it occurred to me that if I wasn't on Ricky's mind enough to call, that he might be at a club, and I could catch him there. Marsha would have told me that was a really bad idea had she still been there (she told me several times afterwards), but she wasn't, so I threw on a nicer shirt, brushed my fur, and went out to the clubs.

The first one I hit was the Red All Over club, a foxes-only dance club. It was open to gays and straights, and I knew Ricky'd been there a lot recently. I walked around, drank a couple screwdrivers, and didn't get asked to dance. Ricky wasn't anywhere in the building, so after I finished the second drink, I left and walked five blocks to the Fur-Nace.

Even though the Fur-Nace was a gay-only club, it was open to all species and was about three times the size of the Red. I'd gotten through a vodka gimlet and picked up another screwdriver, and I still hadn't seen Ricky.

I went down to the basement, which featured ultra-fast dance mixes and was lit in deep blue only, for critters with good night vision. The action in the center of the floor was frenetic, so I stayed around the fringes, moving slowly through the crowd, scanning the glowing eyes and sniffing scents. It occurred to me how ridiculous I was, searching through clubs like some sort of wanna-be private detective. I think I was about ten minutes from giving up and going home when I caught a familiar scent. It wasn't Ricky, though. It was lupine, and in half a second I realized it was Ricky's paramour from Tuesday night. I checked him out: healthy from the smell of him, a good foot taller than me, with grey fur and big shoulders, almost Terry-sized. He looked bored and not particularly bright, but I supposed I was a little biased. He had on a tight shirt with the Dragons logo stretched over his chest, and a smooth pair of casual slacks that highlighted his admittedly nice butt. His tail swished against the fabric, slowly. I downed the rest of my screwdriver and walked over to him.

He looked at me as I walked up and then twitched his nose. "Hey, you smell familiar. Do I know you?" His ears flicked to the side as he tried to identify my scent. I have a pretty good memory for smells, but apparently he didn't, or maybe foxes all smell alike to him (I've heard that said before).

"No," I said, "but you know my boyfriend. Tuesday night. On my couch."

He blinked. "This Tuesday? The black fox — Ricky?" Then he took a half step back and crossed his arms defensively. "Hey, he came on to me."

"I know. And it's 'silver fox.'"

"What is?"

"That's what the color phase is called—oh, never mind."



He looked confused again, then took the offensive. "So what's this all about, huh? He didn't tell me he had a boyfriend. Don't come taking it out

on me." He flexed his biceps in what he probably thought was a subtle hint that he could take me if I tried to make trouble.

I shrugged, and then the vodka grabbed my tongue and said, "I know you've fucked a fox. I was wondering if you've ever been fucked by one."

Okay. It's easy for me to blame the alcohol, but the truth is it was anger at myself, anger at Ricky, and a childish way for me to prove that I was still desirable — to 'get back' at Ricky somehow. The alcohol just knocked down the barriers that would normally have told me that it was a stupid thing to do.

Those barriers were all back in force the next morning when I woke up with my muzzle full of wolf fur, naked in a strange bed with a muscular wolf body under me like a rug, my stomach to his back. I jerked awake, fur bristling at the unfamiliar smell and the strong wolf musk in my nose, and rolled off him in a panic. I took a second to compose myself, but it took a little longer for my fur to lie flat. He propped himself up on an elbow and looked at me sleepily.

"You always get up this early?" he mumbled.

"Yeah, uh," I paused while my heartbeat slowed, "I have to meet someone this morning."

He nodded and yawned wide. "It was fun. See you 'round sometime. Just pull the door shut on y'way out." With that, he closed his eyes and his body settled back into sleep.

I got up quickly and then staggered, realizing that had been a mistake. My head throbbed with a minor hangover made worse by the quick motion, so I closed my eyes and stood still for a moment before scanning the apartment with eyes and nose for my pants. I slipped them on quickly when I found them. It felt weird walking naked around a stranger's apartment. Once I got the rest of my clothes, I let myself out.

The morning sun was way too bright. Shielding my eyes, I looked at the street sign. Twenty-five blocks from home, give or take a block. I could either walk it or call Marsha for a lift.

It didn't take much thought to decide to walk it. My head hurt enough already without Marsha giving me a hard time, and maybe I could get some breakfast on the way home. I started out, setting a steady pace so I wouldn't get tired too quickly. As I walked, I thought back to what I could remember about last night. I remembered using protection, which was good — foxes

and wolves are related enough to be able to transmit diseases. I wondered if Ricky had. He was usually pretty good about it. I remembered that the sex had been okay, a necessary release for me, but in hindsight I felt dirty and more than a little ashamed.

What did Ricky see in it? I wondered. On one level, I guess, it was nice to know that I could proposition a complete stranger — and a good-looking one, at that — and not be laughed at. But the sex hadn't been worth it to me. Maybe it would've been better if I'd been completely sober, but I hadn't been that drunk. And the wolf, whatever his name had been (he'd told me... Mark? Marty?), had seemed used to this lifestyle. I guess he didn't have any trouble finding partners whenever he wanted one. Me, I knew that life wasn't for me. I wasn't flushed with the conquest, or mellow from the sex; I just wanted to get home and clean myself off in the shower.

On the way home, I passed a donut place and grabbed a very unhealthy breakfast. I was thinking about Ricky again. The whole episode had made me miss him even more, so I found myself almost jogging the last three blocks to my apartment. My energy deflated somewhat when I saw he still hadn't called, but a good shower made me feel a little better. I was starting to get depressed again when Mike knocked on the door.

"Hey," he said, "I went out and picked up the book after work on Friday and finished it this morning. It's pretty good. I wondered if you'd be interested?" He held out a copy of "Desert Paradise."

I took the book and stepped back. "Is it better than the movie?"

"I thought so. But I usually do."

"I guess I don't read the book often enough to know."

He smiled, and brushed his whiskers with a paw. "I can't help it. I love books."

"I'd hope so. You majored in them." He laughed. "Hey, want to come in for a bit?" I figured it'd help me to have company, so I wouldn't get too gloomy thinking about last night, or about Ricky not calling. If I got irritable, I'd make some excuse to get him to leave. Or else I'd tell him the truth.

We sat and talked about books for a while, which meant he did most of the talking. I've got a few favorite books, but I never had the patience to sit through any of the classics we didn't get crammed down our throats in high school. He talked about college for a bit after that and we compared

experiences; he'd gone to a high-class university in the northeast, while I'd gone to a big engineering school here in town. I told him about some of the practical jokes the engineering students used to come up with, and he told me about his six months on the humor magazine. "I thought I was funny, but there's a big difference between making your friends laugh and making ten thousand furs laugh. Took me a few months to figure that out." He shook his head.

"Oh, trust me, not everyone thought those practical jokes were funny, either."

He smiled. "Isn't that the point?"

"Sometimes. But some of the guys were pretty cool about it, and the professors loved a good one, even when it was on them —" The phone rang. "Oh," I said, "that's probably... I should take it in the bedroom."

"Should I go?" He started to get up.

"Yeah, this might take a while. Thanks for coming over!"

I heard the front door close as I hit the speaker button. "Hello?"

"Hi, Andy. Were you in the shower?"

"Hi, Ricky. No, just... talking to someone." I paused. "How are you?"

"Should I call back?"

"No, no, they left."

"Oh. I'm fine, I guess. How about you?"

"I've been waiting for you to call."

"I called last night, you weren't in."

Damn. "No, I went out... actually to some clubs, looking for you."

"Aww, that's sweet, Andy. I didn't go out last night. It took me a while to get up the nerve to call you."

I closed my eyes. "Why?"

He sighed. "I was afraid you wouldn't want me to come back."

"What?? Why?"

"It just sounded like you thought I left you for Lionel. I haven't slept with him. I mean, not since September."

"Ricky, I don't care if you slept with Lionel. Do you want to come back?"

"I didn't, though."

"Okay, fine. Do you want to come back?"

"Yeah. I miss you, Andy."

"I miss you too, hon."

"Andy? I'm sorry about the wolf."

"Hey," I said, "just come back and we'll talk about it. I'd rather talk to you in person."

"Okay," he said. "I'll be there in half an hour."

It was actually twenty-eight minutes later that he walked through the door. I'd been trying to figure out the best way to be standing when he walked in. Should I be nonchalant? Should I let my tail wag? Should I be in the bedroom? Living room? Kitchen? The kitchen seemed contrived, but being in the living room would draw attention _to the missing couch, and the bedroom was too far from the door. I settled on the living room, but as I was sitting tapping my paw on the floor, I realized I had to go to the bathroom, and that's where I was when the front door opened.

"Andy?"

"I'll be out in a minute!"

He'd dropped his suitcase and was standing in the doorway to the bedroom when I came out. He turned and smiled that beautiful smile at me and I just melted. We hugged tightly, and I can't tell you how good it felt to have him in my arms again. It was like your first bite of food after a day and a half without — only better.



"Mmmm," he sighed. "I've missed you."

I buried my nose in his fur and inhaled deeply. "Oh, I've missed you too."

We just held each other for a while. "What happened to the couch?" he said.

I tried to figure out how to phrase it, or whether to avoid it altogether, and in the end just told him. "Salvation Army took it," I mumbled.

His ears went back. "It really bothered you that much."

I stepped back a little, keeping my arms around him. "I don't know if I want to talk about this right now." I could hear Marsha yelling at me, telling me I was giving in, but he'd only been back for five minutes and I wanted to enjoy it for just a little longer.

Those soft amber eyes looked into mine. "I don't know, Andy. Maybe we should talk about it. Lionel said we should resolve that before anything else." He walked me to the bed, sat me down on it, and sat next to me.

"I know. Marsha said the same thing." I sighed. "It just felt so good to have you back."

He kissed my muzzle. "It's good to be back," he said. "I... I'm really sorry about that, Andy. I don't know what I was thinking. I just knew you'd be away and I didn't want to go all the way to his place. He's way uptown somewhere."

"I know," I said without thinking, and then caught myself. "I mean, I know it was something like that. But I guess it's more than just that you brought him here." I hung my head. "I know I said I was okay with you sleeping around, but I don't think I am. It hurts, Ricky. I know sex doesn't mean that much to you, but can't you see that it does to me?"

He sighed. "I can. I don't know what to do about that."

"Would you be willing to go two months without sleeping with anyone else? Just to see if that's a solution?" Two months didn't prove anything. I knew that, deep inside, but I was desperate for him to make some kind of gesture, just to prove he was willing to try.

He bit his lip. "Monday I would've said no. But I've really missed you, and I've thought about what you meant to me, so... yes, Andy, I'm willing to try. If you'll talk about the other things that aren't right. Why you won't go out with me anymore, and why we don't talk as much."

I nodded, and tried to keep my smile restrained, but I couldn't help wagging my tail against the bed. Ricky grinned at me then, and his started wagging too.

"I think things are going to be better. Ricky." I put my arm around him and kissed him, and we lay back on the bed. A short while later, our clothes were on the floor, and we made up officially. Then, just to be sure, we made up again.

* * *

Things were good for the first week. We acted like newlyweds again, being considerate of each other and holding paws wherever we went. We talked about our problems, too. I decided I wouldn't mind going to the clubs if I knew he wasn't picking out future bed partners, and overall we decided we should do more things together. We also resolved to talk to each other more. I went to the Fur-Nace with him and had a pretty good time dancing, and I dragged him out to see "Desert Paradise." Mike came over a couple times that week. I introduced him to Ricky, and Ricky's way with people cut through Mike's initial shyness quickly. Lionel, Terry, Misha, and Marsha came over for dinner that weekend, and it seemed just like old times.

There was still an undercurrent that bothered me, though. It felt sometimes like we were forcing things. It was a little tiring for me, and I could occasionally see the same in Ricky. The second and third weeks, we slowly began falling back into the more familiar patterns. I didn't feel up to going out for dinner, or he didn't want to go to the concert I wanted to see. We were still talking, but the talk became less intimate. We got along well, but I could feel that our lives were drifting apart again. I tried to talk to him about it once, but he insisted that things were going well and that we'd be fine. Meanwhile, he went to the clubs with Lionel when I didn't want to go, and I went to the movies with Mike when he didn't want to come with me.

It all came to a head about a month after that. He'd gone out to the Fur-Nace again, and I would've gone with him except that I'd just gone the previous night. I moped around a bit that evening, wondering why he insisted on going out to the clubs instead of spending time with me, but I put in a movie and relaxed with a nice quick dinner, and by bedtime I felt all right again.

Usually Ricky came in about half an hour after my bedtime when I hadn't gone to the club with him. He'd wake me up and I'd kiss him and sometimes we'd make love, and sometimes we'd just talk for a little. It was a nice little

ritual, and it was looking forward to that that made me not mind quite so much when I turned out the light without him.

I woke up with a start. The bed was still empty, and the clock said it had been nearly two hours since I'd gone to sleep. I flicked my ears and flattened them, worried. What if something had happened to him? Then I caught a scent in the apartment, and realized that the click of the front door must've woken me up. Ricky was walking through the living room. When he reached the bedroom door, he hesitated and sniffed the air. I tried to pitch my breathing so I still sounded asleep, but I must've failed.

"Andy?" he whispered.

"Yeah."

He slipped out of his clothes quickly, and slid into bed beside me. His paw found my chest and rested there. It was cool from the night air. "Sorry I'm so late, hon."

"I was worried about you." I snuggled closer to him and hugged him.

"I just lost track of time," he said, but there was something a little odd in his voice and in his body language. I pressed my nose to his chest, as I liked to do, and inhaled his clean, musky scent.

"You smell clean," I murmured. "Did you shower?"

He flinched. "Yeah. I got kinda worked up at the club, so I stopped at the gym and used the shower."

I could hear his heart beat. It sounded faster than usual. Maybe just from the exertion, but if he'd stopped to shower, it had been a long time since he was dancing. I lifted my muzzle to look at his eyes. They shone in the dim light. "Really, Ricky?"

"Yeah." But he swallowed and was looking more uncertain. "I have a key, you know."

"I know." I studied his muzzle. "It just seems like a strange thing to do, when you could've showered here."

He didn't say anything, but as I looked at him, I knew. It had probably been Lionel, but maybe not, and in any case it didn't matter. He hadn't been able to keep his promise, and then he'd lied to me about it. His eyes flicked away from mine and his paw dropped off my chest. I flipped the covers back and rolled out of bed.

He caught my tail. "Andy?"

"I'm going to sleep on the couch, Ricky."

His breathing quickened. "Andy, I'm sorry. I tried, but we were dancing so close and I just ... I just..." His voice caught. "I didn't want to hurt you."

"You did," I said. "Please let go."

His paw relaxed, and my tail slipped free. I heard him whisper, "I'm sorry" again before I stepped into the living room.

I curled up on the new couch, tail between my legs, and leaned my head on the throw pillow. It was an empty gesture, because there was no way I was getting to sleep. I managed to keep my eyes dry for a little while, but I couldn't stop thinking about Ricky and me, about how my idyllic vision of us wasn't going to happen. I had to face the fact that somewhere along the line, one or both of us had changed, or we hadn't been as perfect as we'd thought we were, and that things were over. I didn't know if it was because he couldn't keep his pants on, or because I couldn't deal with that, or because he didn't seem to think about me unless I was around, or because I couldn't assert myself. It didn't matter. And when I thought about what we'd had, and how happy I'd been, that's when the tears started.

I kept pretty quiet, and cried myself out in half an hour or so. After that I just lay there thinking about the same stuff over and over: what I'd done, what he'd done, what I would do, what we would do, and I couldn't get to sleep. From the bedroom, I heard him shifting around, and eventually I heard soft sobs. That was really hard on me. One of the best parts of having him around was that we could each count on the other when one of us was upset. I sat there and listened to him cry for a good long time, and with every minute, I ached to run in there and hold him and make it all better. But I knew I couldn't. I kept telling myself that I couldn't.

I got up off the couch and padded to the bedroom door. His sobs were more distinct there, but they paused as I leaned against the doorframe. I saw his body shift in the bed, and caught the gleam of his eyes, as I was sure he could see mine. We stayed there as the seconds dragged into minutes, neither of us moving. My paws twitched, wanting to hold him; my whiskers longed to brush his soft fur; I ached to hold him against me. But I could hear myself and Marsha telling me that if I did, I'd go back to him and forgive him, and this whole thing would repeat.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, and walked back to the couch. I pressed my fingers to my eyes, but I got the pillows damp again anyway.



I must have dozed off at some point, because Ricky was shaking me gently when I woke up. He had a robe on. "You'll be late for work," he said softly.

He was sitting on the edge of the sofa. I propped myself up on an elbow, but made no move to get up. "I'm sorry, Ricky."

He shook his head. "No, you shouldn't be. I'm sorry. I treated you badly." He paused. "I guess I took it for granted that you'd always be here. I don't suppose that's true."

"I don't think so," I said softly.

"I'd like to think there's something I could do, but even if there were, you probably wouldn't trust me to go through with it. Hell, I wouldn't trust me."

"Ricky." I put a paw on his arm. "Look. I thought we were right for each other, I really did. We both tried to make ourselves something we're not to get it to work."

He nodded. "You deserve better than me, Andy. You're a sweet fox. I know there's someone out there for you."

"Oh, Ricky." I could feel pressure behind my eyes again. "You deserve someone who can let you be you. You're a terrific fox. I never stopped loving you."

"I love you too, Andy." He leaned over and hugged me, and I hugged back. We held it for a good long while, sharing our hurt even though we couldn't make it any better.

Finally, he sat up and wiped his eyes. "You'd better get to work," he said. "I guess I'll go over to Lionel's tonight."

I wanted to say "okay," but I didn't trust myself, so I just nodded. He went back into the bedroom, and I got up to take a shower.

I was dead at work that day. I would've called in sick, but I didn't particularly want to be around the apartment with Ricky there. So I stared at screens, mumbled my way through phone calls, and tried to keep my tail off the floor. At 11:30, when I was preparing to go to lunch, Lionel called me.

"Hey, Andy, do you have lunch plans?"

"Yes," I lied.

"Can you spare me some time? I really want to talk to you."

"I'm pretty busy."

He sighed. "Look, Andy, I know what you think. Please let me tell you my side."

"Okay, I'm listening."

"Not over the phone."

"Why not?"

"Because I want to do it in person! Sorry. Look, I'm really sorry. I know what you're going through. We're friends, too, remember?"

"Are we?"

"Just give me a chance. You owe me that much."

"I owe you???"

"Okay, that wasn't quite the right word. Well, maybe it was. Don't write me off without listening to what I have to say."

I sighed. The clock was crawling toward 11:40. "All right. Where do you want to meet?"

"When do you have to be at lunch?"

"I'll cancel. Where should I meet you?"

We met at noon at a nearby cafe. Lionel is muscular and not shy about showing it off. I think I've only ever seen him in sleeves twice. He's also pretty congenial, and I usually wouldn't have hesitated to meet him for

lunch. This time, for obvious reasons, I didn't feel much like being there, let alone talking. He waited until we'd ordered to start saying his piece.

"Andy, I'm not going to pretend Ricky isn't interested in me. But I wanted to clear something up with you before anything else happens. He didn't sleep with me, last night or a month ago. We haven't done anything since September."

I flicked my ears and sipped my soda without saying anything, but he could read my disbelief.

"I'm being honest. We don't hang out as much as we used to, but I still consider you a friend, and I laid it on the line with him. I said I didn't want to be the guy who broke you two up. You were about my favorite couple."

I shrugged, but my ears came up. "You didn't break us up. I don't blame you for that."

"Okay," he said. "I really want to make sure of that. I know it's the right thing for you to say. I want to know that you mean it."

"I do mean it, Lionel." I leaned forward. "Ricky made those mistakes on his own. If it wasn't you, it would've been someone else."

"It was someone else."

"Right. That's what I meant."

He took a drink. "He called me this morning." I just looked at him. "He's pretty upset. I wanted to see how you were doing."

"I'll be fine," I mumbled. My ears had gone back down again.

"I know you will, Andy. So will he. But if you need a friend in the meantime, I'm here. I'm not going to take sides."

"There aren't any sides to take. We both know it's not working. We'll be happier this way, eventually." I looked down at the liquid bubbling in my glass. "I'm sorry about what I thought, Lionel. I hope you and Ricky give it a shot, and I hope you understand if I have to keep my distance for a little while." He nodded. "But I won't let you guys go. I had three wonderful years with him, and those will always be a part of me. As much as this hurts, we'll both always have that. Would you... would you remind him of that, tonight?"

"Sure," he said, and smiled at me. "You know, Andy, you're an attractive fox, and a good one. You'll find someone else."

"Maybe. I don't want anyone else, right now. We've told you how we met, right?" He nodded. "That was like a dream to me. I felt ugly and alone, and

he made me feel complete. And I guess he found something in me that he was looking for, too. I thought that moment would carry us through anything. But love isn't static like that. Love is about... hell, I don't know. I thought I did. But it's more than a single meeting. People fall in love at first sight all the time, but you never hear about the ones that don't last. I guess that's me, now." His ears flicked forward sympathetically.

I took another drink, and then looked up at him again. He had both paws on the table and was obviously going to let me talk. So I did.

"You know, Lionel, sometimes things are so beautiful when they start that you can't imagine it ever being any other way. The changes happen so subtly that you still have this beautiful image in your mind, and you're trying to force the current situation to fit what you remember. So you overlook things, you convince yourself things and people can change, or change back. But the truth is that people change." My tail swished restlessly. "You know that old song? 'Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm sixty-four?' I'd always thought that would be Ricky and me, always the same, living happily ever after. But there is no 'happily ever after.' There's 'happily for a while,' and that while can be different lengths of time, but it always ends, somehow. Everything ends."

* * *

Ricky cleared his stuff out over the next three weeks. There were some tears, but knowing the relationship was over was a big hurdle. I still spent some nights alone by choice, moping in the apartment, but I also went out with Mike, Terry, Misha, and Marsha, individually or together. Mike met the rest of the gang and got along pretty well with them. I also went out to some clubs and tried to pick up dates that wouldn't be just one-night stands, but they rarely worked out. Janine set me up with a fox from Accounting, but after two dates I don't think he would've returned my calls even if I'd been inclined to make any.

Ricky and Lionel did give it a go, and after a month and a half, we felt we could manage a dinner together. I invited them to my place one Friday night, and Mike and Marsha were supposed to come over, too. Mike had met Ricky a few times, but never met Lionel. I wanted to invite him, though, because we'd become pretty good friends. Up to that point, we

hadn't really talked much about relationships or anything like that. I think that what I was going through when we first met had hindered that, and we never felt the need to explore it.

The dinner went reasonably well, I guess. I was jealous of Ricky because he and Lionel seemed pretty happy together, though he admitted to me when we had a private moment that he missed me and hoped he'd get to see me more. He said it was weird being in the apartment again, and I said it was weird having him here, and we hugged briefly, but it was just a friendly hug.

Marsha and Mike stuck around after they left, I think to make sure I was okay. We didn't talk about Ricky and Lionel at all, but after about half an hour of cheerful talk, Marsha stood up and said she had to get home to her new girlfriend. This was the one, she announced to us, and I chuckled because she says that about every female she gets a second date with. She's a big believer in positive thinking.

"I can take off, too, if you're okay," Mike said after she'd gone.

"I wouldn't mind talking some more." I patted the couch.



He sat down and smiled. I didn't say anything, so he started. "How long were you guys together?"

"Three years," I said. It felt good to be talking to him about the relationship. I felt like I was cementing our friendship, adding another level to it that he deserved to see.

"Wow, that's a long time. Beats my record." He ducked his head.

"What's yours?"

"Three weeks."

"What? You're kidding!"

He shook his head. "Nope. Cyril was his name."

"And you still lasted three weeks?" I'd said it before I realized I didn't know how recently this had happened. I hoped it was distant enough that he could joke about it.

He smiled. "It was tough. Actually, we'd been in a long-distance relationship for eight months before that."

"Long distance? Did you meet online?"

"Yeah. I was a senior, he was an engineer out here. I moved out here when I graduated, moved in with him, and moved out three weeks later."

"Jeez. What happened?"

He sighed. "We were really close online. Told each other everything, deeply in love, and all that. But when we were living together, he had his own life, and I wasn't just there when he logged in, I was there all the time. He couldn't adjust to that. Plus, I didn't know anyone else out here, so if he didn't take me out with him, I just sat at home."

"Why'd you stay in this area?" He shrugged. "Was home an option?" He shook his head. "Oh." I tried to think of a delicate way to ask if his parents were still alive, or if he'd been kicked out. Lots of gay people in our generation can't go home, even though their parents are alive.

He saw my curiosity, and touched his torn ear. "This is why I left home. I can't really go back."

I winced and slid an arm around his shoulder. "I got kicked out when I came out to my parents, too, but my father never laid a paw on me."

His shoulders twitched, and he turned to me with a slight grin. "Oh, my parents were fine with me being gay. Actually, it was a bit annoying. They kept trying to set me up with this kid in the parochial school whose parents they knew. I guess they figured if I'd have a religious guy as a partner, I'd get into heaven somehow. The funny thing was, he wasn't gay, but his parents had caught him dressing up in vixen's clothes once and the whole town thought he was."

"Didn't you grow up in the midwest?" He nodded. "I thought all those towns were pure and wholesome."

He laughed. "Those little towns are more fucked up than your big cities. My best friend from fourth grade was arrested my junior year for dealing drugs. I wasn't hanging out with him much then, but it was still weird. And we had a cult in town. They were all skunks, and they'd been ritually descended, and dyed their white fur green. They always helped out at community events, and they were pretty companionable as long as you didn't ask them about their Leader, so the townsfolk didn't mind them. Heck, their money spent the same as everyone else's. Also, I think the descending helped."

"Wow. I'd no idea. So... were you going to join them? Is that what happened?"

"No." He sighed, and his smile faded. "Dad always thought I'd be a farmer like my brothers, but I was more interested in reading, and, well, you see how I'm built." He lifted a skinny arm. "I announced I wanted to go off to college, and Dad thought I'd be studying agriculture, so he was all for that, and I got in with his blessing. Then he opened a piece of mail welcoming me to the English program, and he blew up. He said I'd tricked him, and lied to him."

"Still," I looked at his ear. The edge was rough with scar tissue.

"Oh, he didn't do that. He yanked me out of school and put me to work on the farm. I lasted about a week. I was sowing the fields, and I was keeping my tail out of the sowing blades like I'd been taught, and I was reading. I'd sneak books out in my pockets and read them in the fields when he wasn't around. So these blades are cutting up the earth behind the tractor, and I was reading a great book by Raymond, and suddenly the tractor hit a rock or something, and I dropped the book over the side. I hopped over to get it, but I hadn't stopped the tractor. I tripped and fell on my side, and the blade on the end shredded the tip of my ear." He touched it again. "Another few inches and it would've gotten my head."

I hugged him. "Yipe."

"Yeah. I couldn't get back up onto the tractor, I was shaking so much. That convinced my father that I wasn't going to be a farmer, and he put me back in school. Didn't say three words to me between then and the time I left for school. I haven't been back since."

"Wow. I've never been through anything like that."

He didn't respond, but he nestled into my embrace a little more. We sat quietly for a bit, and then he took a deep breath. "You have really nice ears, you know."

"Huh?" I looked down at him, surprised.

"You do." He didn't look up at me. "I notice ears a lot, since then. I noticed yours the first time I saw you."

I chuckled. "I thought you were looking at something else."

He blushed. "Only for a second or two. Then I saw your ears. They're really nice, very big and pretty. I'm jealous."

"I think they're too big," I said. I've always had trouble taking compliments, something Ricky tried to help me with.

"No, trust me."

"Well, thank you," I forced myself to say. Then I felt I had to return a compliment, so I said, sincerely, "I really like your eyes. Talk about being jealous."

"Your eyes are plenty nice," he said, still not looking at me, but his tail swished slowly in pleasure.

"Nah, they're okay, but yours are that nice clear amber. And very expressive."

He let me see them, then, lifting his muzzle. "Thanks," he said with a smile.

"Mmm. No problem. I'm only telling the truth." My nose was an inch from his. He closed the gap, and then touched his muzzle to mine. I parted mine slightly, and we slipped easily into a kiss. He was a good kisser, nice and gentle, and the warm feel of his tongue on mine was delightful.

We held that for a nice long while. When our muzzles slipped apart by mutual consent, he looked at me and smiled. I was smiling back.

"That was pretty nice," I said.

He grinned and nodded bashfully. I leaned back against the couch, and he leaned his head on my shoulder. I nuzzled his whole ear gently, and then out of habit nuzzled the other. He flinched.

"Sorry." I moved my muzzle hastily.

"No... it's okay. Go ahead."

His scent was fairly strong, but not objectionably so. I nuzzled the strange shape of his torn ear and scritched his chest gently. He lifted a tentative paw and did the same for me. We cuddled together for a while, exploring each other. He lifted a paw and played with my ears for a while, which made me feel a little silly, but he obviously enjoyed it a lot.

We didn't do anything too serious, and I thought he might be reluctant because we were in the living room. That bothers some people sometimes. So I said, "Maybe we'd be more comfortable in the bedroom?"

"Oh... I couldn't," he said.

"Why not? It's okay," I said. "I feel really good about this, Mike."

He nodded. "I do too."

"Then why not?"

He fidgeted. "I feel kinda dirty. I don't want to get in bed with you like this."

I rubbed the fur between his ears. "You feel fine." He didn't look convinced. "To me, anyway. But if you want to clean up... well, maybe we should move to the shower, not the bedroom."

His ears perked, and his smile got a little wider. "Really? That might be okay."

I kissed his nose. "C'mon, you." I took his paw and led him to the bathroom, where I started the shower running.

"You sure you're okay with this?" he said as he took his shirt off.

"I'm fine." I looked at his chest as I took off my own shirt. He was thin, but I couldn't see his ribs. His fur was a little matted and straggly, but we'd be fixing that soon.

We stood and looked at each other while the steam rose from the shower. Finally I grinned and unbuckled my pants. "I guess it's nothing you haven't already seen," I said.

He blushed again as I stepped out of my pants. "Your turn," I said. "Or I can do it, if you like."

"No, that's okay." His fingers fumbled as he undid his pants, and undid the tail loop at the back. They slid to the floor. I couldn't help but take a moment to appreciate the view, but I tried not to stare too long because he was looking a touch nervous. There was a smile on his muzzle, though, and his tail was swishing pretty happily.

I tested the water and stepped into the shower, feeling it soak into my fur. I beckoned him with a finger. He hesitated, and then joined me. I closed the door behind him, almost forcing him into my arms. We stood there and hugged while the water soaked us thoroughly.

I made sure he was good and wet, and then poured out a generous handful of conditioner/soap. "Stand there," I said, and proceeded to rub my paws all over him, lathering up his fur and feeling all the contours of his body. When I got near certain areas, he gasped and put a paw on my shoulder to steady himself, but I just smiled and soaped them with a paw as I would've any other spots.

"There." I moved him under the shower to rinse out his fur, and helped him get all the soap out.

"Mmmmm. Thank you." He smiled at me, and then took a pawful of the soap himself. "Your turn." His fingers rubbed thoroughly into my fur from my chest down to my hindpaws except for the one patch of fur he was still too shy to touch. When he stood from soaping my paws, he looked at me and hesitated uncertainly.

I smiled. "You missed a spot," I said softly.

He grinned, wet tail slapping against the side of the shower, and remedied the situation, rubbing gently and working the soap into the fur there. I closed my eyes and braced myself against the shower wall. I was starting to get a little weak in the knees, but fortunately he stopped just before I was going to tell him to. "I'd better not get myself in trouble," he said, and pulled me under the water.

I got my fur clean, and grinned back at him. "You were getting darn close."

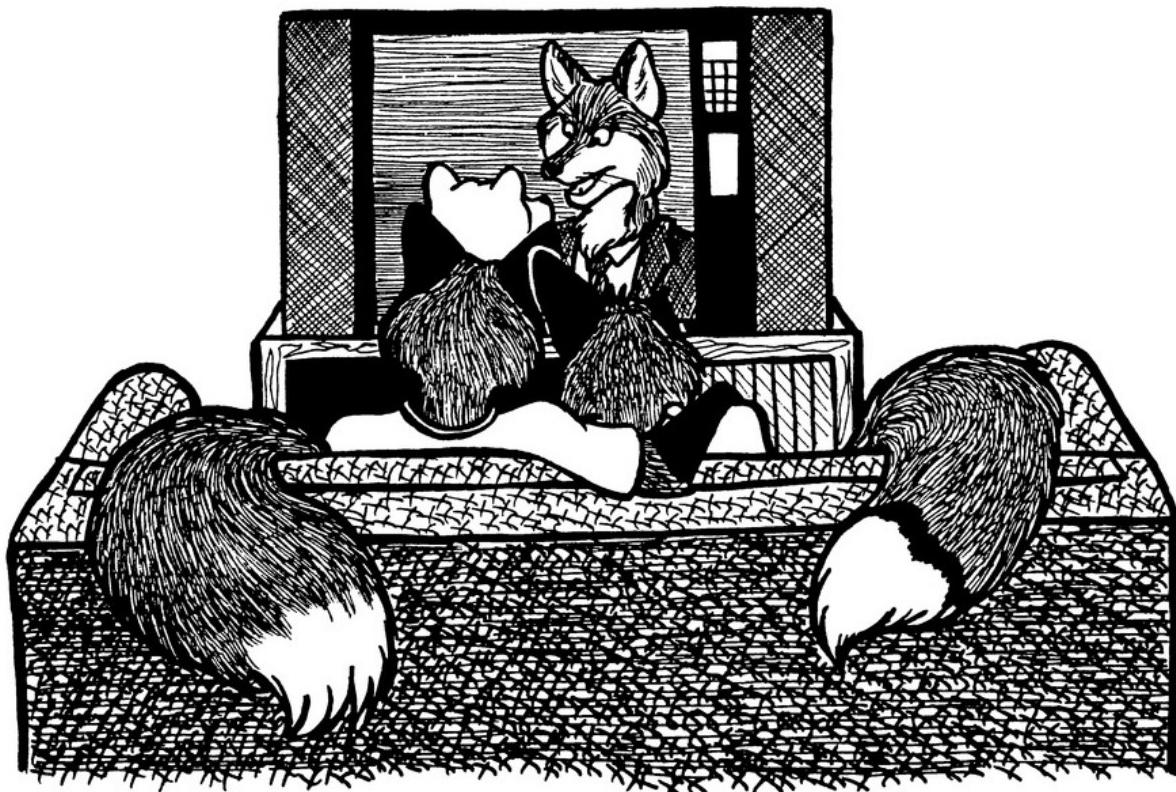
I pulled a spare towel for him. We got most of the dampness out of his fur, and then I took him to the dryer. We both lay under it while the hot air ruffled and dried our fur. "Mmm, this is nice," he said. "I haven't had one of these since college. We never had one at home."

"I couldn't live without it." Our paws helped each other dry by ruffling the fur.

When we were mostly dry, or at least more impatient than wet, I pulled him into the bed and we put our arms around each other. He wasn't Ricky by a long shot, but Ricky hadn't worked out too well in the end. His expressive eyes were happy, and his arms around me and his wagging tail indicated that he was as excited and interested as I was—and just as nervous. And that's as good a start as any.

We kissed, and I turned off the light, and the rest I will leave to your imagination. But when you imagine it... imagine it good.





The mouse sighed. "You picked the wrong vix to howl with. Sliggo's not going to forget it. Ever." He put the cheese away. "You're a cat without a country. I'm a mouse who needs a fast cat. When it's done, I know a nice retirement home. Lots of laps to curl up on. Plenty of food."

"That's the best you can do? Put me out to pasture?"

He stared at me. For once, I think he was actually telling the truth. "Listen to me. I'm not the only one Sliggo talked to. There isn't a cat in the city wouldn't take you out for what he's put on your head. My way, at least you get to live."

I hate it when a mouse talks sense.

Joe Manx by Justin Stanchfield

